スレイヤーズすぺしゃる㉖

ミッシング・セイント

神坂一

イラスト あらいずみるい

富士見ファンタジア文庫

Slayers Special Volume 26

Missing Saint!

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Missing Saint [Part 1]

Dappled sunlight from the summer canopy stained the ground below. Thanks to the lush greenery, it was somewhat cool, but as I continued to climb the mountain path, even with a low-level Cold Spell active under my cloak, I found myself thinking...

"I was just wondering," I said, addressing the back of the female mage walking ahead of me. "Couldn't you use some kind of Levitation spell to just... float us up? It seems like it would be a lot easier."

She looked back over her shoulder, offering a refreshing smile. She was quite the beauty—tidy features framed by silky, long black hair. Her deep purple official robes suited her well. Given her title as the Vice Councilor of the Mage Guild, she was likely past her mid-twenties, but I would have believed her if she'd told me she was twenty.

"We're almost there," she replied.

Her words held no lie. Soon, the trees thinned out, and the view opened up. Ahead, I saw several men and women dressed in work clothes loitering about. Further back among the trees, a few large tents were visible.

An archaeological excavation was being sabotaged by someone, and they wanted the culprit caught. That was the request Tiphall-san had brought to me when I showed up at a certain town's Mage Guild.

"So... what exactly is this 'ruin'?" I asked.

The staff numbered about fourteen or fifteen in total. They wore work clothes, but apparently, every single one of them was either a mage or an apprentice.

"It's right there," she said.

Where she pointed, a small cliff face opened like a gaping mouth, half-buried in green.

I couldn't help but sigh. I knew what the expressions on the faces of the excavation mages meant.

Ruin exploration. It promised many things: lost technology, ancient knowledge, or buried treasure. However, ruins that allow for safe and easy investigation are practically non-existent. Usually, they've become nests for pests known as Beasts of Darkness, or they're riddled with countless traps.

Among such things, the most tedious kind is the "buried under dirt" variety.

Now, some people might tilt their heads at that. If you're a mage, surely you can use a simple Tunneling spell? One shot of that and you should be able to clear away the debris burying the ruin instantly, right?

Certainly, that is possible. By chanting a simple spell to interfere with the earth spirits, the debris is cleared, and a hole is left behind.

"But," she began, as if sensing my thoughts, "there's the possibility that accidents are just overlapping, or it could even be a curse."

"Uh, well..." I started to mutter at her back, but she didn't even turn around.

The staff raised their voices in protest. To them, I was the Black Mage who wielded dragon-slaying spells and had toyed with and killed countless bandits! If I used my spells to gouge out the area, any important messages carved into the stone walls—and of course, the walls themselves—would be ruined.

"Everyone wants to see what kind of unique deduction a person like that can offer!" she announced.

In the end, to prevent such a disaster, they had to work the old-fashioned way: manual labor. Following the protests of the female staff, another man stepped forward. While stone golems were sometimes used as assistants for rough digging, that was the extent of it.

"Oh you're the investigator…"

At that moment, a man pointed at me and screamed at the top of his lungs.

"IT'S YOOOOOUUUUU!!"

I pointed back at him. "Oh."

Noticing us, the workers turned our way, and one of them walked toward us. The dappled sunlight reflected off the iron mask covering the right half of his face. Instead of hands, metal pincers extended from his sleeves, clicking and clacking.

"I am the lead excavator here, Michael-gichi~!"

...Gichi?

"Bringing in an outside investigator is an insult to our honor!" someone complained.

"Curses" might sound like superstition, but when a mage uses the word, it's a legitimate academic term referring to mental-plane interference by unstable residual thoughts.

However, Tiphall-san remained completely unmoved. She clapped her hands lightly. "Enough grumbling. You all agreed to bring in an investigator."

"We thought someone would be chosen from *our* Mage Guild..." another person grumbled.

Tiphall-san nodded. "I thought so too at first. But then, Lina-san here showed up! Don't you see? This isn't just an investigation—it’s Lina-san Watching!"

"Stop calling it 'Watching'!!" I screamed.

She gasped and looked at me. "Oh, no, don't misunderstand. I didn't mean it in a bad way. It's a 'Watching' in the good sense—the idea that us researchers can gain new perspectives and ideas by interacting with someone who has different values, like Lina-san."

"...It didn't really sound that way to me..."

She looked away from me and addressed the group. "If this is someone's doing, someone from the outside should be able to look at the situation objectively. And if it's something 'unpleasant,' having a person with a reputation like Lina-san's will be more reassuring. This is a final decision, so please, I ask for your cooperation."

The mages responded with dissatisfied faces and silence.

Mini-golems that looked like boxes with insect legs walked past my feet in a line. They were transport golems for the debris. The ones going in were empty; the ones coming out were piled high with dirt.

The scale of the ruins was larger than I had imagined. Mages were working here and there.

"We will cooperate as much as possible with your investigation-gichi. Is there anything you want to ask-gichi?" Michael, the lead excavator, said as he guided me through the ruins, his pincers clacking.

I addressed his back as I walked a step behind him. "Well, I do have one question."

"What is it-gichi?"

"Why are you... like that?"

Time froze with a literal *snap*. Director Michael stopped. The mages working nearby stopped. Only the golems continued their rhythmic walking.

...Maybe I shouldn't have asked?

"I'll take you somewhere we can talk privately-gichi. Follow me-gichi."

He led me to a dead-end passage where work had mostly finished. A lone magical light flickered on the ceiling, and no workers were in sight.

"Originally, I was a plain man with no special features-gichi."

He spoke while fidgeting with his iron mask and pincer hands.

"About a year ago, I foolishly asked Vice Councilor Tiphall out-gichi."

He turned around and sat down on the floor. With a heavy *clunk*, both of his "hands" fell to the ground.

I flinched back for a second.

"The result was a total rejection. She said she didn't like people with no personality-gichi. But... I didn't give up-gichi! I thought and thought, and eventually came up with this character-gichi!"

...What the hell is her taste in men?

"Ahaha. I see." I said in a flat voice. He shook his head.

"I too worried if this was the right path-gichi! I wondered if the verbal tic should be 'Giga' instead of 'Gichi'!"

"That's where you worried?!"

I felt like pointlessly pursuing a "character" like that was the end of the line regardless of the verbal tic, but...

"Thanks to this, I managed to get engaged to Vice Councilor Tiphall-gichi."

"IT WORKED?!"

So a handsome man is a no-go, but a weirdo in an iron mask is okay? Tiphall-san's personality is truly a mystery.

"But to truly be a man worthy of her, I needed to achieve results-gichi! That's when I found this ruin-gichi!"

He looked around. "This is believed to be a ruin related to the 'Lost Saint' Senti-gichi!"

"Senti?"

When I tilted my head at the unfamiliar name, he let out a dry laugh.

"It's no wonder you don't know-gichi. He wasn't a mage, but a priest of the Red Dragon God Church-gichi. He lived over two hundred years ago and was highly respected for his noble character-gichi. But one day... it was discovered that he was hiding a massive collection of erotic books, and he was excommunicated. He’s a legendary figure-gichi!"

"What kind of legendary figure is that?!"

"Just imagine, what kind of content was in those books to warrant excommunication?! The clues must be sleeping in this ruin-gichi! If I can uncover that, it will surely be a benefit to future generations-gichi!"

"No, I don't think it will..."

"It’s no exaggeration to say that what sleeps here is a heritage for all mankind-gichi!"

...I’m pretty sure you can refuse an inheritance. Knowing it was useless to say it out loud, I just muttered it in my heart.

"In short! I absolutely must make this excavation a success-gichi! I don't want to doubt my comrades-gichi! But if there is a saboteur, they must be jealous of the magnificent achievement I am about to make-gichi!"

I tilted my head. At least as far as I had heard, there wasn't a single thing to be jealous of...

".....Is that so.....?"

It's not uncommon for a culprit to target investigators. If you're mentally prepared, you can deal with it calmly when the time comes.

"I'll take that into account for now. After I do a lap, show me the site where the accidents happened."

"Understood-gichi," Michael replied, clacking his pincers.

"I believe this is the main path leading deeper into the ruins-gichi," Michael explained loudly over the noise of the work.

One of the branched-off passages led to a staircase. The lower half was buried in sand and was currently being excavated. On the stairs, walls, and ceiling illuminated by magical lights, strange patterns were carved, creating an eerie atmosphere.

Mole-golems with shovel-like hands scraped away the sand and threw it onto the backs of the box-golems moving around. About three staff members were there, either directing the golems or doing fine work on the walls and stairs. The sound of scraping sand echoed, and the air was dusty.

A female mage working by the wall stopped and walked over to us.

"Is that so?! Then, unlike the rumors, she actually has some reason!"

Short blonde hair. She looked over twenty, but she was only slightly taller than me.

"This is Melka-kun, who is in charge of excavating this route-gichi," Michael introduced her. She gave a polite bow and then looked at him sheepishly.

"Um, it's dangerous here."

"But didn't you say the traps were sealed-gichi?"

"Yes, but..." She stole a glance at me. "Normally it's fine, but, um, what would happen if someone were to paroxysmally fire off an attack spell...?"

"Wait a minute! What kind of rumors are going around about me?!"

She gasped, looked away, and muttered, "Um, I can't... I can't say such cruel things to your face."

"It's reached the level of 'cruel'?!"

At that moment.

"Now, now. Putting that aside-gichi," Michael stepped between us.

Click.

A small sound beneath our feet. Then...

BOOM!

With a deafening roar, sand poured down from the ceiling!

I didn't even have time to scream. The sand swallowed everything.

Actually—I was prepared.

The moment the sand fell, I covered my mouth with both hands to secure a small pocket of air and crouched down. By the time the flow of sand subsided, I used a Tunneling spell toward where I thought the stairs were.

"*Dug-Haut!*"

It was a struggle against the sheer volume of sand. It collapsed as soon as I dug, but the sand I erased with magic was gone for good. Since this spell only affects the earth, it wouldn't harm people buried in the tunnel.

The first thing I heard was a cheer.

I brushed the sand from my face and squinted. I could see magical lights and workers. Director Michael and a few others had also been buried. Just because I was safe didn't mean I could rest. I chanted the spell again—

"*Dug-Haut!*"

Everyone else had also used the same spell simultaneously to help dig us out.

Tiphall-san came rushing in after everyone had been rescued and we had retreated to the tents on the surface.

"What happened?!"

"The ruin's traps activated, and several people were buried alive-gichi. But for now, everyone is safe-gichi," Michael replied from a corner where he was resting.

"Michael... you were buried too? Your poor iron mask is all scratched up and lost its shine because of the sand..."

"But this has its own charm..."

The people around them naturally looked away as they started their weird conversation.

However, there was one person just staring at them. Melka was sitting on a cot near the medical tent, resting.

A swirl of emotions was visible on her face. Noticing my gaze, she looked over, smiled awkwardly, and walked over to me.

"I’m not making excuses, but I’m certain the seal on the trap was perfect," she said in a low voice.

I nodded slightly. "I'm sure." This was likely sabotage.

"But," she continued, her face pale, "this... if things had gone wrong, someone could have died!"

True. Some people had lost consciousness, but thanks to the quick response from me and the mages above, no one's life was in danger. But if we had been slower, several people—maybe all of us—might have died.

"The plan would have been canceled if that happened. Just as the saboteur intended."

"How could they...! To go that far...!"

Of course, to Melka, this wasn't someone else's problem.

"We are all taught how to disarm and seal common ruin traps when we're assigned to an excavation... If you know where the trap is and have the tools, I think anyone could tamper with it. For this trap, you could probably trigger it just by removing some of the special glue that held the trigger plate in place..."

"I see..." I thought for a moment, then put an arm around Melka's shoulder and lowered my voice. "Do you know anyone who might hold a grudge against Tiphall-san or the Director?"

She flinched and stole a quick glance at where Tiphall-san and the Director were. After a moment's hesitation, she whispered even lower.

"Well... the Vice Councilor is a beauty, and the Director is a wonderful person... I think they’re a good match... but..."

I frowned. *The Director is wonderful?*

"Why would someone go so far to sabotage them... anyway, we have to stop this. That spot was a path for the golems too... It’s highly likely someone loosened the seal so it would give way after a certain amount of weight passed over it. Do you know anyone who could do that kind of handiwork?"

"When you put it that way..." she said hesitantly. "Um, to be honest, the Director wasn't always like that."

"I know. He told me himself."

She gave a small, wry smile while looking down. "Actually, I... I used to have a bit of a crush on Director Michael. Before... that."

"I see... Well, that's... complicated."

She nodded vigorously. "If only... if only his hands were drills instead of pincers..."

"No, that wouldn't change anything."

"What are you saying?!" she raised her voice. "Drills are perfect for excavation! It’s just common sense!"

"No, I mean..."

"Ah, sorry. I shouldn't have shouted suddenly."

"No, the shouting is fine." The drills, however, were questionable.

"But... what I’m trying to say is that there were many people like me who liked the Director. And after he became like that, and started dating the Vice Councilor... and then there's the fact that this excavation was backed by her, and if it succeeds, they might get married..."

I knit my brows. "So in that regard, anyone could have a motive..."

It was a conclusion I didn't want to think about, but I said it anyway. Melka nodded silently.

Regardless, I started my investigation. I made a list and visited each person one by one.

The claim that it was a "curse" came from a man named Klein.

"It happened because Michael is getting cocky and carried away," he spat out the moment I asked him in the tent. He was in charge of cleaning, restoring, and managing the finds. Once the artifacts started coming in for real, he would be so busy he wouldn't even have time to eat, but for now, he was just helping out here and there.

"You call him by his name... even though he’s the lead excavator?"

Klein ran a hand through his black hair irritably. "We were in the same class. It feels itchy to call him 'Director' now."

"I see. So, you'd feel like he's left you behind if he achieves great results with this excavation?"

At that, his tone became immediately sharp. "He’s just lucky! He happened to find this ruin...! That’s the only reason he’s getting all this credit!"

"And on top of that, he’s doing well with Vice Councilor Tiphall..."

He looked slightly embarrassed. "Well... she was like an idol in our Mage Guild. Any man would have admired her."

He scratched his head. "But well, I’ll admit Michael is working hard. Look at his current outfit."

"That... thing?"

"Yeah. I could never pull off that kind of fashion."

"No, no, no. That is not fashion."

"But I heard it’s popular in the White Magic City?"

"Who told you that lie?!"

Tiphall-san... I felt like something was about to break inside me, but I pulled myself together.

"Putting fashion aside... do you have any idea who might be behind this?"

He looked troubled. "Even if you ask me... most magic books are kept in guilds, but there are many that aren't. Even for a traveler like you, there are countless books whose titles you wouldn't know. To be honest, I think this whole thing is a curse."

"A curse?"

He nodded. "This ruin is believed to be related to the 'Lost Saint' Senti."

"I heard that from the Director."

"Then this is simple. Have you heard of the book 'Statistical Factors of Ghostification' published by a member of our guild ten years ago?"

"No, unfortunately... it's no exaggeration to say there are as many research papers as there are magic books."

"I see. It’s famous here. You know that if a human dies with strong regrets, their spirit can linger as a ghost, right?"

"Sure."

"That book has statistics on what kind of cases lead to ghostification."

I thought for a second that it sounded almost interesting.

"Among them is this result: 'If a male dies an untimely death, the probability of ghostification due to lingering regrets over erotic books hidden under the bed or in a closet is 36%.'"

"That's high! And for such a stupid reason!!"

"What do you mean 'stupid'?! This is a life-or-death issue for men!" Klein argued passionately.

"Think about it! Given the scale of this ruin and the density of traps, the 'Lost Saint' Senti must have hidden a massive amount of erotic books here—especially the ones with really extreme content! If he died without disposing of them... wouldn't it be perfectly natural for him to become a ghost and sabotage anyone who tries to dig them up?!"

".....Is that it!....."

If that were true even by a one-in-a-million chance, it would be far too tragic.

I wondered how much I could trust a book like that—it’s not like they could survey ghosts nationwide. However, I couldn't reject his theory outright. I couldn't say it was impossible.

Actually, I had once encountered a bizarre ghost born from a series of strange coincidences. If that was possible, it wasn't a stretch to imagine a ghost lingering in this world solely to keep his erotic book collection hidden. ...Though it’s a pretty depressing thought.

I tried asking around for other information, but in the end, I came up with no real results.

Eventually, night fell over the excavation site in the mountains. The night mountains are filled with all sorts of sounds: the wind, the chirping of insects, the cries of birds and beasts, and someone's snoring. Most of the survey staff slept in tents at the camp near the ruins. Of course, they were free to go back to their own homes in town if they wanted, but many lived in the tents to save travel time, only returning home once every few days when things like a change of clothes became an issue.

There were two large tents where men and women slept separately—or so it was supposed to be—but I chose a smaller meeting tent for my lodging. I stayed separate from the others for the sake of the investigation. If the culprit were a woman and I slept in the same tent, she wouldn't be able to move carelessly. At the same time, it would make it harder for me to catch her in the act.

While listening to the night sounds and wondering what the culprit would do now that I had intervened, the chirping of the insects suddenly changed. In the darkness, I quietly sat up. I slid halfway out of the tent and scanned the surroundings. Beneath the starry sky sat the black mountains and black trees.

Tiphall-san had other duties due to her position, so she actually spent very little time here, but most of the other staff lived the camp life.

It was then. I felt like something moved in the corner of my vision. I looked reflexively, but there was nothing moving there. No... wait.

I realized someone was trying to enter the ruins!

The spot was right where the small cliff led to the entrance. I wasn't certain. I might have misseen it, or I might have just seen the shadow of a stray animal. Moreover, if it were a person, they'd likely have a light... but there was no light there. However, a certain presence was definitely there. Either way, I needed to check it out.

I quietly crawled out of the tent and approached the spot, hiding my presence. I peered down from the top of the cliff. There, I could see the wooden boards blocking the entrance. I knit my brows in silence. The boards were slightly shifted from the opening. Of course, they might have been shifted since work finished for the day.

After hesitating for a moment, I eventually climbed down the cliff, moved the boards, and peered inside the ruins. Only darkness lay within. At this rate, I wouldn't be able to see my surroundings, let alone someone waving a hand in front of my face.

Naturally, stepping inside without a light was impossible. Someone intimately familiar with the internal structure might be able to pull off such a feat, but... what to do? If I turned on a light and the culprit was inside, it would be like warning them to run because a pursuer had arrived.

While I was hesitating, a sound of destruction echoed from deep within the ruins!

Next Episode Preview:

The sound of destruction?! Is it the Saint's curse, or someone's sabotage?! If it's sabotage, who's the culprit?! And what will happen between Tiphall and Michael?! (Is that one even important?!) Can Lina solve all the mysteries?!

Holding onto various mysteries that aren't really mysteries, the next episode is: "Missing Saint [Part 2]!" Wait for it while counting watermelon seeds!

Missing Saint [Part 2]

Summary:

"Find the saboteur of the ruin excavation." The site Lina headed to was a bizarre one. Buried there was the heritage of the Lost Saint, Senti—the erotic books left behind by an excommunicated man. The client was Vice Councilor Tiphall. The lead excavator was Michael, who turned himself into an iron-masked pincer-man to win her love. Melka wanted to return Michael to a normal human. Klein was Michael's jealous classmate. Amidst theories of the Saint's curse, the incident occurred! Lina, having narrowly avoided being buried alive, spotted a figure sneaking into the ruins that night!

The second explosion occurred on the surface. Just as everyone came running out with shouts of surprise, I was standing in front of the ruin entrance.

"This way!"

It was only natural. The second explosion was an attack spell I had fired off to call everyone. If I had rushed inside at the first sound of destruction, there was a high chance I would have passed the culprit in the dark. So, I started by making a bang to gather everyone.

"What happened?!" Klein, the one pushing the curse theory, was the first to arrive and ask. The other staff members followed shortly after.

I looked at Klein and said, "Unfortunately, the curse theory is a bust! I saw someone go in just a moment ago! And then, a sound of an explosion came from inside...!"

The staff's faces turned pale. As everyone looked ready to surge into the ruins, I raised a hand to stop them.

"Wait! Everyone, stay here! If we all go in, the culprit might mix in with the group and escape. For now, I'll go in alone! I might need your help later, but please wait here for now! Please!"

The group exchanged glances, and Klein nodded. "A-Alright. Be careful!"

I nodded back and stepped into the darkness. I chanted a spell under my breath.

"*Lighting!*"

As soon as I spoke, I pressed the magical light I had created against the nearby wall to keep it fixed. The air wasn't just cool; it was chilly. I proceeded by repeating the process of moving forward and lighting the way, both to secure a path and to prevent the culprit from vanishing into the dark.

Before long, I stopped deep inside the ruins, speechless. It was the stairs where the incident had happened during the day—the path believed to be the route to the innermost sanctuary. It was buried.

They must have used a Tunneling spell. The surrounding walls and ceiling had collapsed, and the sand stored for the traps had flowed out, completely burying the stairs. The "sound of destruction" I heard at the entrance was likely the sound of the sand cascading down all at once. Even to my eyes, it was clear that repairing this wouldn't be easy.

".....They got me....."

My voice echoed hollowly. There was a gaping black hole in a nearby wall. That was likely the culprit's escape route. While I was standing around at the entrance, they had used a Tunneling spell to destroy the passage and create an exit route back to the surface.

By now, they were probably out on the surface and had secretly blended back in with the crowd gathered at the entrance. I stood there, clenching my teeth against the sense of defeat.

".....How could this happen-gichi..."

Witnessing the devastation, Lead Excavator Michael muttered in shock. The way he used that weird verbal tic and clacked his pincer hands even at a time like this was either impressive or just wrong.

"It’s too early to despair," I said, standing beside him. "True, the saboteur—I mean, the culprit—outsmarted us this time. But that doesn't mean it's impossible to reach the back of the ruins, right?"

But Michael remained listless. "…….That is true-gichi. But an excavation has a schedule and a budget-gichi."

"It'll be fine! Once we find the culprit, we'll make them work for free and then fleece them for 'damages' until their pockets are empty! That should cover the hole!"

He knit his brows at my extremely rational proposal. "…….Lina-san, no matter how wrong their actions are, as a human being, isn't that…"

Wait? Did I just get lectured on morality by an iron-masked pincer-man with a 'gichi' tic? Anyway...

I felt a little deflated, but I managed to pull myself together.

"In any case, we can't just drop the excavation and let the culprit go just because we were sabotaged. I'll set up a security plan, so you work on redrawing the excavation plan for tomorrow, okay?"

"I understand-gichi. You're right, this is no time to be depressed-gichi," Michael said, nodding.

The next morning, Tiphall-san arrived for a site inspection and muttered in a low voice. Before the group was the buried staircase—or what used to be a staircase.

To be honest, this turn of events was a bit bad. Before, it wasn't clear if these were accidents or deliberate acts, but this latest one was clearly man-made. This meant that because I had started investigating, the culprit had become desperate and might even risk destroying the ruins in self-destruction.

I didn't care what happened to the ruins of some "pervert saint," but I'd be in trouble if I didn't get my reward.

"Well, leave the investigation to me," I said with a confident smile, hiding my anxiety.

Work continued that day. Everyone was busy, and the tiny golems continued their tasks as usual. While Tiphall-san, Michael, and I were looking at the site, Melka—who was in charge of this route—and a few others were attempting a re-excavation.

"This is going to be a bit difficult..." Melka turned to us, her voice sinking. "They probably used Tunneling, but the walls and floor are damaged too. We won't be able

to restore that part... and if we move the sand without reinforcement, more might fall from above, or worst case, the ground above us might collapse."

"Does that mean...?" Tiphall-san whispered, her face pale. "Does that mean finishing the excavation within the current budget and schedule is impossible...?"

"How could this be....."

Melka hesitated for a moment, then gave a small nod. Tiphall-san turned pale.

"I've worked so hard for this, looking forward to seeing the pervert saint's 'interesting' collection....."

"Tiphall-san? Did you just...?"

"This is a scientific loss!!"

She cut off my retort with a dignified voice and clenched her fists.

"True, the path to completion has become steep due to repeated sabotage! However! Despairing here would be nothing less than letting the noble pursuit of knowledge surrender to violence! We must be strong and carve a path once more!"

The surrounding staff were moved by her grand speech and nodded deeply. ...It seemed they hadn't heard her previous mumble. *Wait, is this woman doing this for fun?*

Just then, a worker came running up, shouting. Seeing Tiphall-san, the worker stood at attention.

"V-Vice Councilor!"

"What is it?"

"Um, well..." The worker looked back and forth between Tiphall-san and Michael. "We found a hidden door during work on another route!"

Behind the hidden door was a passage. It had been blocked by a collapsed wall, and today had been spent clearing it. Whether it actually led to the innermost part of the ruins remained to be seen.

"Perhaps *that* is the real route to the back of the ruins!"

A shock ran through the group at the report.

Night in the mountains is chilly, even in summer. That night, I was on guard duty at the ruins alone. I'd taken a nap after noon, so I'd likely be fine until morning. The cold could be handled with my cloak and the campfire, but I wondered if something could be done about the swarming gnats. I kept brushing them away, but they were beyond annoying.

Still, the possibility that the culprit would move tonight was extremely high. If the Saint had "hidden" the books rather than "discarded" them, wouldn't he have made a safe and easy path for when he wanted to look at them again? He wouldn't have dodged countless traps and risked his life just to glance at his porn. If so, it was highly likely the path found today was that very road.

If that were the case, they might reach the center of the ruins as early as tomorrow. Then, the culprit's plan to sabotage the excavation would fail. In other words, the culprit had no choice but to move tonight or give up.

Rustle.

The sound of leaves came from the trees away from the camp. I stood up and called out. Naturally, there was no answer. I left the fire and ran toward the sound.

Then, deep underground where even the sound of summer insects couldn't reach, I heard a small voice clearly.

A spell incantation. A whisper was born in the lightless dark.

"*Lighting!*"

I released the spell I had prepared beforehand. Illuminated by the low-intensity magical light stood Melka, frozen in shock.

"Yes. That's far enough."

"L-Lina-san? Why are you here.....?"

"What do you mean 'why'? You threw a stone in the wrong direction to make me think you were over there, thinking you could sneak into the ruins while I was distracted! Of course, reflecting on yesterday, I dug a side-path from the tunnel you used to escape to the surface, and I made another entrance further away. I just buried the original

hole. I pretended to fall for your obvious decoy and came in through the new entrance."

I had practiced a bit at a distance so I could navigate from that entrance to here without a light, so it wasn't much trouble.

Melka's face contorted at my words. "Wait...! Wait a minute! That makes it sound like I'm the culprit!"

Beside her was a large statue of a deity carved into the wall. It was one of many throughout the ruins, but both Melka and I knew a hidden passage had been discovered there today.

"Another entrance...?"

"Then why are you here right now?" I sighed deeply at her transparent act.

"T-That's... look! I couldn't sleep, so I thought I'd take a walk, and when I saw Lina-san—who was supposed to be on guard—wasn't there, I got worried that something happened to the ruins!"

"I see~" I said with a pleasant smile. "Without a light?"

"B-Because! If I used a light... um, I might get a sunburn!"

I kept smiling at the stupid excuse. "Then Melka, why were you just chanting the Tunneling spell?"

Her face twisted with agitation. I had heard the incantation. There was no talking her way out of this.

"Th-That's...!"

"That's?"

"It was my grandmother's dying wish!!"

"YOU DON'T HAVE A GRANDMOTHER!!"

At my scream, she finally seemed to give up and slumped to her knees.

"It's true... I wanted Director Michael to go back to being a normal human." She paused, then shook her head slightly. "No... no. I was jealous of the relationship

between the Director and Vice Councilor Tiphall, and I tried to sabotage the excavation. It's true I destroyed the stairs last night, and I intended to destroy the hidden passage found today. BUT!"

She turned a serious gaze toward me. "The sand trap that activated on the stairs yesterday morning—that wasn't me!"

"Eh?" I knit my brows. "Weren't you planning to trigger a trap like that to die with Michael or something?"

Maybe Michael stepped on it by accident, but she originally intended to trigger it herself at the right moment? But Melka shook her head.

"No! I don't want to die with the current Director—the iron-masked one with pincer hands! Accidents started happening on-site, and rumors started spreading... and that gave me the idea to do a few things myself... but everything that happened wasn't my doing! Please believe me!"

I see. A copycat, then.

But that meant there was another culprit besides her. There was a chance she was lying to lighten her sentence, but what if she was telling the truth? If I assumed she was lying and let my guard down, the real culprit might carry out a fatal sabotage.

"Anyway, let's go back to the surface and we can talk about this slowly."

I raised a finger to my lips to silence her. I drew my short sword—still in its scabbard—and fixed a magical light to the tip.

"Take this and wait here quietly. I'll be right back."

I turned on my heel and retraced my steps without a sound.

"Hm... I see..." I muttered in a bitter tone. It was a persuasive explanation. Melka nodded weakly and stood up unsteadily. Together, we headed back toward the entrance.

At the next corner—

THWACK!

I launched a kick! The magical light I had left floating in the void cast a weak glow. I didn't hesitate to strike the figure that was about to chant a spell at the entrance of the hidden passage.

A solid impact. A wonderful groan.

Judging by the feel against the sole of my boot, it was a direct hit. The figure fell and stopped moving. Rolling on the ground with eyes wide in the pale magical light was the "curse theory" man, Klein.

Early the next morning. I tied up Melka and Klein, gagged them so they couldn't use spells, and took them to Michael's tent to explain what happened. Unlike the general staff, he slept alone in a small tent to organize documents. There was a reason I brought the matter to him first rather than everyone.

"But... it doesn't seem like the story ends here," I muttered gloomily.

"What do you mean-gichi?"

I sighed. "I made a list of the incidents that happened, and when I subtract the ones these two say they did... there are some left over."

"Left over?"

"Yeah."

That was why I only spoke to Michael. It seemed the case wasn't closed yet. There was a possibility of a third or even a fourth culprit.

"Indeed... if the excavation of Saint Senti's erotic books is a success, it will be a historic achievement-gichi."

Is it, though?

"If you're a mage, it wouldn't be strange to think, 'If someone else is going to get all that credit, I might as well get in the way,' out of pure jealousy-gichi."

Melka hung her head, and Klein looked away.

Well, in my opinion, everyone was already plenty confused just by the fact that they were excavating this weird ruin while shouting about how important it was.

But I understood Michael's concern. I thought for a moment. "Then how about we have these two help with the excavation of the hidden passage?"

The three of them widened their eyes.

"If we tie them up and leave them somewhere, someone might find out and start rumors, or they might escape. If we keep them where we can see them, it'll be fine. Of course, I'll come along as a guard. And these two are strictly forbidden from incanting. If they try to chant or run or get violent, I'll blast them with an attack spell from behind without mercy."

".....Then I leave them to you-gichi," Michael said. "Now that that's decided, let's redraw the plan-gichi! Today we might finally lay eyes on the books Senti left behind-gichi!"

Ugh. Personally, I don't want to see those objects at all. Regardless, the work began. When the small transport golem removed a large piece of rubble, a passage stretching straight into the darkness appeared.

"OOOOOOOOOOH!"

The voices of the staff crowded in the narrow passage overlapped. It was shortly after noon. Tiphall-san had arrived and insisted on being there for the opening, so the hidden passage—which wasn't very wide—was extremely crowded.

It was a large party of seven: me, Tiphall-san, Michael, Melka, Klein, and the two staff members who found the door yesterday. Plus the work golems. To be blunt, it was incredibly cramped and annoying.

But the moment the path opened, that stress vanished.

"Stay calm-gichi. There's still a risk the walls might collapse-gichi! Proceed with caution-gichi!"

Despite his words, Michael's voice was tinged with excitement. The group suppressed their eagerness and moved deeper into the dark passage with magical lights. The two nameless staff members were in the lead, checking for traps. Even Melka and Klein, who had been sabotaging the work, were radiating excitement at the prospect of a discovery.

If you're a mage who seeks the pursuit of knowledge, this is a natural reaction. Even I, despite knowing that what awaited us was likely a "disappointment item," found myself caught up in the atmosphere, my heart racing just a little.

"Lighting!"

I didn't know how many times I had released that spell. The light revealed not another narrow passage, but a portion of a vast space. We had emerged from the tunnel. Someone cast the next light, but it didn't reach the back of the room.

It reminded me of an audience chamber. Thick pillars lined the left and right of the long room. Directly ahead, a stone pedestal, a stone box, and a single chair sat in the dark, visible only as silhouettes.

"Finally..." Tiphall-san whispered, instinctively taking a step forward.

『So, intruders have come this far...』

A voice—no, was it truly a voice? It was as small as a whisper in one's ear, yet as loud as a thunderous echo. An impossible voice resonated through the darkness. Everyone gasped and looked toward the pedestal at the far end.

It wasn't a light. Something white and diffuse, like a mist or haze, swirled and twisted in the darkness of the void. As it gathered, it began to take the shape of a person. A long, flowing robe and a tall hat—the figure of a priest. He had a beard around his mouth. His features were unclear, but I could tell his expression was twisted with rage.

"It's Saint Senti's..."

"Ghost-gichi!"

Tiphall-san and Michael cried out in shock.

『My treasure... I shall let no man lay eyes upon it...!』

I wasn't sure if it was a voice or a whisper of a curse vibrating directly in my brain. The Saint's delusion continued its ghostly murmurs. If only that "treasure" were something a bit more dignified, the tension would have been higher.

"I have a memory loss!! It feels like I was being controlled by something!!"

"I just realized! I what was I doing until now! Ever since that ghost appeared in my dreams, I haven't been myself!!"

Klein and Melka both shouted in a flat tone, putting on faces that said, *We just pulled off something clever!* It was a look that said, *Wait, you two! Don't try to pin everything on me just because you can!*

I scratched my head. This excavation site—from the lack of actual treasure to the two saboteurs and now a ghost—was cursed from the bottom of my heart.

".....Look, putting aside these two and their sleep-talking. I have zero interest in your 'treasure' anyway... but some of the incidents really were a curse, weren't they? I think it's about time you dropped this weird obsession and moved on to wherever it is ghosts go!"

『SILENCE, BRAT!』

...I guess trying to be polite didn't work. Oh well. I pointed a finger sharply at the shadow.

"Fine! If that's how you want it, I'll send you to the afterlife by force!"

『Try it if you can!』

The ghost streaked through the air! I began chanting a spell while keeping my eyes locked on the opponent. Just as the spell was finished, the ghost suddenly changed its trajectory and vanished behind a nearby pillar!

Is he running?! The next instant, I heard a heavy rumbling sound. Emerging from behind the pillar was a female statue twice the height of a human!

『I shall crush you!』

The ghost's voice echoed from within it! I couldn't see from where I stood, but there were likely rows of these statues between the pillars. He had possessed one of them, manipulating it like a golem to attack!

But! Whether he had a stone shell or not, his true form was still a ghost! I released the spell I had finished chanting!

"*Elmekia Lance!*"

It was a spell from the Astral Side that dealt direct damage to the target's Astral plane. A human would only end up bedridden, but if a ghost took a direct hit, it would be instantaneous annihilation! It didn't matter if he was wearing a suit of stone armor!

The light I fired pierced the golem's chest—

『HO! To think you would use a soul-destroying spell!』

The Saint's mocking laughter rang out. The ghost's white mist scattered around the statue. The stone statue stopped mid-pose and the mist gathered again, reforming into the ghost. He had abandoned the statue and fled just before my spell hit.

『But it means nothing if you miss!』

He began flying around erratically as if to taunt me. It was true—no matter how powerful the attack, it meant nothing if it didn't hit. And hitting a target moving at that speed would be difficult.

However, I smirked defiantly and took a step forward while chanting another spell under my breath.

『OH? You still intend to challenge me?!』

I ignored his mockery and stepped further forward.

『If you turn back now and give up on desecrating this land, I might let you go!』

I didn't let the threat scare me; I started running! Straight toward the pedestal! Toward the stone box! If I opened that and spilled the contents for everyone to see, it would be the most painful blow to the ghost!

『STOP! STOOOOOOP!!』

The ghost's scream was almost like a death rattle. Sensing my intent, Senti moved to stop me, likely intending to possess me. A presence rushed toward me from behind. The distance to the pedestal was shrinking rapidly, and the presence behind me was closing in just as fast—the hair on the back of my neck stood on end.

"*Elmekia Lance!*"

I fired the spell backward, from under my arm and through my cloak! Without even looking, I fired based on intuition alone—

『GAAAAAAHHHHHHHH!!』

A non-human shriek echoed. An unexpected strike from point-blank range. I looked back to see the Saint's ghost, its spiritual body half-lost, writhing in agony. It seemed he couldn't dodge that one. Even though he had taken a spell that would normally turn a ghost to dust instantly, he was still struggling desperately to maintain his human form.

But that resistance was only a matter of time.

『Curse you...! I... I won't go alone! You're coming with me!』

Before he could finish his sentence, he turned into a white mist and surged forward in a single breath! The remnants of his obsession became a wind carrying a freezing chill that blew past me—and then. Silence returned, and the stillness seeped into my ears.

"Lina-san!" Tiphall-san cried out. "Are you alright?!"

"I am... but..." I muttered, turning around. Before me were the pedestal and the stone box.

"No... could it be!" Tiphall-san shouted, and everyone came running over. Michael's pincer hands pushed open the lid of the stone box—

『...Ugh...!』

Several people let out a groan of despair simultaneously. The final power Saint Senti's ghost used before vanishing wasn't to take me with him.

Inside the box were dozens of objects shaped like scrolls. Every single one of them had turned to ash that would crumble at a touch, though they still held their shape. He had destroyed them at the very last second.

"To use his final strength... just to dispose of his erotic books... He’s a man to be admired..."

Klein muttered solemnly amidst the stunned group. *Admired? Really?*

And so, the excavation itself ended in failure.

I received my reward properly, so I had no problems, but Tiphall-san's disappointment was immense. Michael seemed more energetic than I expected; he was clacking his pincers and saying he'd look for the next site. Well, it might have been forced cheer.

Melka and Klein weren't turned over to the authorities, but they were placed under the custody of the Mage Guild. Basically, they were going to be worked to the bone as low-level grunts for a long time.

Anyway, that's how it went. The "Heritage of Humanity"—the books the perverted Saint hid—was lost forever.

All's well that ends well.

(Missing Saint: END)

The Adulterated Wine Expedition [Part 1]

A tense atmosphere appeared on the road ahead. Naga and I both stopped in our tracks for a moment. But the hostility wasn't directed at us.

A small mountain highway. Both sides of the road were covered in trees, creating blind spots everywhere. Even though it was daytime, there was no one around—a perfect spot for an ambush. Yes, it was likely that bandits were about to attack someone just ahead.

In a situation like this, a normal person would make a U-turn and retreat immediately. But not us!

Naga and I exchanged a look, nodded, and ran toward the presence while chanting spells under our breath. Soon, we saw five or six thug-like men at the end of the road! The moment I saw them—

"*Dug-Brand!*"

BOOM!

The attack magic I fired easily blew all the thugs away.

"You're safe now!"

The words I intended for the victim died out hollowly among the trees.

"Hey, Lina." Naga noticed the same thing and looked around. "The person who was supposed to be being attacked... they're not here."

The only one who responded was one of the thugs, who raised a twitching hand as he lay on the ground.

Taking a better look at the man, I'd say he was in his late twenties. Black beard, black hair. A brimmed hat and a slender, tall frame. He wore well-tailored clothes. Looking closely, he had handsome features, but he wore an eyepatch over his right eye. His entire outfit was black.

"A falling out among thieves?" Naga asked.

"Why would you jump to that conclusion?" I knit my brows in silence. "He doesn't look like an honest citizen no matter how you look at him."

The man let out a groan of protest. "............I am Leoville-Haut-Brion... I may not look it, but I'm a traveling winemaker."

"A traveling winemaker?" Naga said, speaking for me.

I couldn't help but tilt my head at how suspicious it sounded. In fact, the man's outfit didn't look out of place among the bandits at all. The man, still twitching, looked up at us and said just one word: "Likewise."

Well. Naga was dressed in her usual outfit—extremely revealing clothes with spiked shoulder guards. I had my shoulder guards, cloak, and bandana. I looked like a normal traveling mage, but the moment you realized I was with Naga, any attempt at an explanation was impossible.

"Well, I mean............" I thought for a moment. I didn't think it was possible to travel while making wine... but before I could call him out on it, Naga spoke up.

"You're *that* Leoville!"

"You know him, Naga?!"

"Hmph! You don't know him, Lina?! He's a celebrity in the wine world!" She puffed out her chest with pride. It was hard to believe, but it was a fact that Naga occasionally knew strange things.

Either way, it seemed a mysterious profession like "traveling winemaker" actually existed...

"Well... I guess that's that. Anyway, if we hadn't helped you, those bandits might have taken your life."

Leoville, still twitching on the ground, looked up at me as I spoke pleasantly. He seemed to have a lot of guts to insist he was "helped" while in that state, but I'll give him credit for the spirit.

"Why are you two in a place like this?" he asked as Naga began chanting a healing spell.

"Hmph. To visit the Wine Town, of course!" Naga replied proudly.

To be honest, as someone who doesn't drink much alcohol, I wasn't that interested in a wine-producing region... but Naga had been the one to suggest it, thinking we might get some fresh grapes along the way.

As we walked along the highway together, Leoville asked more questions. This was after we had healed him and confiscated the bandits' wallets. It turned out we were heading to the same town. He offered to buy us lunch as a thank you, so we decided to travel together.

The story was simple, but when Leoville told it, it was long. Very long.

He inserted trivia at every turn—like how straw is placed on the cargo to prevent quality degradation when transporting wine, and how at least one mage who can use cold-based spells is always assigned to the shipment. Naga reacted to every single detail, which only encouraged Leoville to show off more of his knowledge. And so, the conversation dragged on.

"Ugh, it's cold!"

"Don't say it's cold! I can tell by the smell, so I can't help it!"

By the time Leoville finished his explanation of the town, we had arrived at Montrose.

I couldn't help but let out a sound of surprise. To the eye, it looked like any other town, but the scent in the breeze was clearly different. If you asked me how, I'd be hard-pressed to say, but it was slightly sweet.

"The grapes seem to be doing well," Leoville said, narrowing his eyes.

"You can tell?" Naga asked with wide eyes.

He pushed up the brim of his hat with a fingertip. "The wind tells me."

In a restaurant on the main street, we ordered over a dozen dishes: fried mountain vegetables, sautéed pork and mushrooms, beef wrapped in pie crust, and autumn vegetable barbecue. I had fruit juice, while Naga and Leoville, of course, had wine.

"Naga, give me a sip of yours later."

We were exchanging such words as we brought our cups to our lips—and then, the movements of Naga and Leoville stopped dead.

".....Did you notice?"

"Of course. The scent is muddy."

Leoville asked, and Naga answered.

"Proprietress!" Leoville shouted to the lady running the shop. "We ordered wine."

".....Eh?" The shopkeeper's business smile faltered slightly. "The wine of this region is famous... right?"

"So, you're saying *this* is it?" Leoville let out a theatrical sigh. "This can't be called wine. To say Montrose is a famous wine region must be a fabrication."

"What was that?! Are you trying to pick a fight with my shop, this town, or the surrounding villages?!"

A man at a back table stood up and shouted. There were four men in total, looking like the kind of thugs you find in any town.

I was stunned that he had correctly guessed what was in the drink. Of course, it wasn't a feat anyone could perform. Among those with training and experience, maybe one in hundreds or thousands could do it.

Leoville slowly turned his gaze toward the men. While the proprietress looked back and forth between us and the men in a panic, they approached us.

"The taste and smell are cleverly disguised to seem like wine. You could call it a well-made cocktail, but you can't call this wine. And you said you're the ones in charge of the wine here?"

The men flinched slightly, seemingly overwhelmed. One look at the confusion on their faces told anyone that Leoville was right.

"How... no way...!" The shopkeeper turned a suspicious gaze toward the men.

"DON'T TALK NONSENSE!!" one of the men roared, his voice cracking with anger.

But Leoville didn't even look at them. He took a single sip of the wine.

"A bit less than half is wine. The rest is Plume liquor, Langold vodka, boiled-down fruit juice, and some black tea—specifically, aromatic tea from Raisel. The cost is about two-thirds of a wine of this class. In other words, it’s an adulterated fake."

The men stopped in their tracks, stunned. They were shocked not just by the fact that it was adulterated, but that he had identified every single ingredient with just one sip.

"There's no way you could know what's mixed in! Even *if* something was in there!"

"I can tell, so there's no helping it," Leoville said, completely unmoved. "Go back and ask your boss. A man named Leoville-Haut-Brion said this. Was he right?"

"Le.....!" At the mention of his name, the men froze. "C-Could you be the legendary traveling winemaker...!"

He's a legend?!

"I don't know about 'legendary,' but it’s a fact that I’m a traveling winemaker."

"Tch...!" The men exchanged panicked glances and then ran out of the shop without even leaving a parting threat. Their faces were pale.

The proprietress stared blankly at Leoville. "Y... You are *that* lord...!"

Lord? Is he even more famous than I thought?

The shopkeeper approached him and then looked at me and Naga. "Then, are you two his attendants?"

"What do you mean 'attendants'?!" Naga protested, followed by me.

"We just happened to pass by and help him when he was being attacked by bandits on the road."

At that explanation, Leoville looked like he wanted to say something for a moment, but then said, ".....That’s more or less correct."

"But, this is a bit bad," the shopkeeper whispered. "Those were people from Mr. Saint-Émilion’s place. He handles all the wine distribution in this area. If you say things like that, I don't think he'll stay quiet."

"So you're not denying that the wine is adulterated?" I asked from the side. The shopkeeper was silent for a moment, looking troubled.

".....My tongue can't tell if wine is adulterated or not... but actually, the previous head of the Saint-Émilion family died a while ago... his son, Simon-san, took over....."

"I see. He’s the type of person who would do something like that?"

The proprietress had a grim expression—she didn't deny or confirm it, but she said, "It’s a fact that suspicious-looking people have started coming and going frequently... Simon-san says he just increased the guards for transport, though..."

Leoville nodded slightly. I could imagine the general situation now. A foolish second-generation son took over for his parent and, holding the local wine distribution in his hands, came up with the idiotic idea of making even more money with adulterated wine.

"Hmph. It looks like we'll need to investigate this," Naga said, exchanging a look with Leoville. They both nodded.

"Why?" My cool retort stopped them for a moment. Naga turned to me with a furrowed brow.

"What do you mean 'why'...?"

"I mean, we haven't been asked by anyone to investigate, and we won't get a reward."

Naga sighed deeply at my opinion. ".....Lina, just imagine this. You order food at a restaurant. Let’s say you order an extra-thick, premium sirloin steak. After a while, you hear the sound of meat sizzling from the kitchen. But what comes out on the iron plate is something that tastes similar, but it’s actually just minced meat, fat, and lean meat stuck together to look like a thick steak."

"UNFORGIVABLE!! THAT’S JUST A HAMBURGER!!"

Having the situation explained in terms of meat, I finally understood the gravity of the situation. And so, burning with righteous indignation, we set out to investigate and uncover the truth!

In a corner of the town of Montrose stood a large building surrounded by a fence. It was made of brick and had almost no windows. Just approaching the front entrance, the scent of alcohol drifted through the air.

On the black marble gate, the name "Saint-Émilion Wine" was written in gold letters. This was the collection center for the wine wholesaler that handled all the wine in the region, Simon Saint-Émilion.

After leaving the restaurant, the three of us visited a few other shops and confirmed that the wine was indeed being adulterated. Then we came here and said one thing to the gatekeeper: we wanted to talk about the adulterated wine. The gatekeeper then ran off to the back of the building.

First, we would shake things up directly. We'd see how they reacted.

"I hope they reflect on this and stop their nonsense," Leoville murmured.

While we waited, I shot down his optimistic outlook without hesitation. "That's naive. If they were the type to reflect and quit after a little rattling, they wouldn't have done it in the first place," I declared flatly.

"Eh... you're right," he replied. Generally speaking, people who think they're "smart" can't tell the difference between being "rational" and being "cowardly," yet they're always so full of themselves.

"They're here," Leoville said.

"Lina, does it ever hurt to hear yourself talk?" Naga asked.

"Oh? Naga, what exactly do you mean by that?"

Our glares were practically throwing sparks at each other, but Leoville's voice stopped a death match from breaking out. Looking toward the building, a group of six or seven men was approaching us. Among them were the gatekeeper and the men who had fled after hearing Leoville's name at the diner. At the center of the group was a pudgy man in his fifties. His taste was atrocious, but judging by his expensive-looking clothes, he was the one in charge.

"I am the person in charge here, Simon Saint-Emilion," the plump middle-aged man introduced himself as the group came to a halt nearby. "I heard some talk about wine

being adulterated in town... Oh dear, if that were true, it would be quite a lamentable tale, wouldn't it?"

In response, I gave him a beaming smile. "Even if someone carries out such an obvious, petty crime, it'll eventually get exposed and only end up strangling the culprit in the long run. Don't you think?"

"Do you have evidence that the wine was adulterated?" Simon countered. "As for us, we cannot simply doubt our fellow countrymen just because of such rumors. If it turns out there was nothing wrong after all, it would adversely affect our future business."

Now he was counterattacking. Of course, I had expected this.

"Evidence, you say?" Leoville raised an eyebrow. "The wine circulating in the town *is* the evidence."

"As I said, I mean evidence that *that* specific wine contains additives. As you may know, wine's flavor changes entirely based on storage temperature or the barrel used. Thank you for informing us."

I see. So he intended to play dumb until the bitter end.

"By the way—" Simon continued with the same expression, "Pardon my rudeness, but surely you didn't just mistake wine that was served in poor condition at a shop, did you?"

"Hah! You make me laugh!" It wasn't Leoville, but Naga who dismissed his words with a laugh.

"The way the alcohol blends! The muddiness of the scent! Anyone could tell that it's been adulterated!"

"Anyone... could tell...?"

The person who murmured this was not Simon, but a man standing slightly behind him. He was tall with gray hair. His age was a mystery—he looked like an unhealthy man in his twenties, yet also like a strangely luminous old man. He turned a piercing gaze toward Naga. "Then who besides you all would know?"

"Who indeed..." Simon hurriedly chimed in, trying to cover the man's slip of tongue. "Anyway, thank you for the advice. We shall investigate."

It was a polite way of telling us to get lost since we had no proof. Fine. Now I knew what kind of person we were dealing with. I let a pleasant smile float onto my face.

"The pleasure is ours. It was truly good to speak with you. Well then."

I turned on my heel.

"Wait! Lina!" Naga called out, but Leoville also turned back in silence.

Simon hurriedly scolded the man behind him. "That phrasing... it makes it sound as if the wine really is adulterated and we know about it. Watch your words."

After making a follow-up comment to us, he turned back.

"A troublesome opponent," Leoville muttered after we had walked a short distance away.

"Hah. Troublesome? That old fox?"

In response to Naga's question, he shook his head. "Not Simon. The man with him, is named D'Yquem[1]. I've heard that of him in rumors. He's the Dark Cocktail Master."

"Dark?"

"Cocktail Master?"

Naga and I both knit our brows at the strange title. Leoville gave a small nod. "A man who mastered various cocktails and was lured into their dark side. It's said he can recreate the taste of a certain liquor almost perfectly using other ingredients. By doing so, he drastically cuts the cost. If he's involved, few could see through the adulteration."

"So Simon hired him," Naga said.

"I see. That would explain why so few can tell it's a fake," I murmured. In fact, among those served the wine, almost no one noticed. If the shopkeepers themselves merely thought the batch wasn't their best work, then it was game over. No matter how much we insisted it was adulterated, they could just dismiss it as our imagination. Or worse, they could claim we were using Leoville's name to extort money. To make matters worse, looking at Naga and Leoville, that theory was actually quite persuasive.

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[1] Di kie m It's one of the worlds most expensive aged dessert wine.

This was getting annoying. In that case...

"I should just blow up that whole building with an attack spell..."

"No!"

"What are you saying, Lina?!"

Before my 20% joke was even finished, Leoville and Naga snapped at me. "What are you thinking?! There’s a massive amount of alcohol in there! What a waste!"

"There is no such miserable proverb!" I shouted back. After screaming, I took a small breath. "But then, what do we do? That guy isn't the type to just trip over his own tail."

"We'll have to ask the craftsmen," Leoville said. "At the very least, they should know the difference in taste."

"Hah. Seems like our only option," Naga nodded.

To be honest, I was starting to lose interest, but for now, I followed the two of them.

We arrived at a village called Blanc, one of several scattered around Montrose, just as the sun was beginning to set. Even calling it a village was a stretch; it was a tiny place with barely ten houses standing amidst the greenery. We had already visited several workshops in other villages, and while the craftsmen looked like they knew something, every answer was "I don't know" or "I have no idea." We had arrived here without any results, so my expectations were low.

There was only one workshop in this village. The brick-walled building, covered in ivy, was located at the edge of the village. As we approached, the rich scent of grapes tickled my nose. I knocked on the front door and called out, "Excuse me!" but there was no reply. Listening closely, I could hear a sound. What was that?

Exchanging looks, the three of us walked around the building toward the source of the noise. Eventually, we rounded a corner—and found a girl and a mountain of grapes.

A large wooden tub sat there, and at its edge, a pestle with a long handle—like a boat oar—was attached. Every time she stepped on or released the end of the handle, the

pestle moved up and down, thudding against the contents of the tub. She was likely processing grapes for wine, but she was doing it alone.

"Not ideal," Leoville leaked a dissatisfied voice, and she finally noticed us and stopped moving.

"Who are you...?" she asked.

"Hah! I am Naga the White Serpent!" Naga announced first.

"I'm Lina. And this person is..."

"Leoville-Haut-Brion. A wandering winemaker."

The girl looked to be about seventeen or eighteen. She wore a clean apron dress and a work cap that completely covered her head, though strands of blonde hair escaped from beneath it. Her eyes changed the moment she looked at Leoville.

"Leoville...!"

Apparently, she knew the name. She opened her blue eyes wide and looked at him with surprise.

"Ah! Um! I'm Marie-Latour! I'm a craftsman at this wine workshop!" she said before Leoville could even introduce himself further.

"I see." Leoville nodded slightly. "The basics of winemaking involve crushing lightly. If you use a wooden pestle to crush like that, you'll end up crushing the seeds as well, which leaves an unpleasant bitterness later. You shouldn't let the pestle hit the bottom of the tub; stop it just before it strikes."

He offered advice as if it were the most natural thing in the world.

"Um, well..." She hesitated for a moment. "I am the master of this place."

Originally, this workshop had belonged to Marie’s father. He was skilled but stubborn, and Marie had occasionally helped him. He had died in an accident a year ago. She had the option to close the workshop, but in the end, she decided to take it over.

After she finished her story, Leoville spoke. "I admire your desire to keep the workshop alive, but at this rate, there must be many things your father hadn't taught you yet."

"Probably..." Marie looked down. If she had decided to take it over, she must have been taught the basics, but there were surely many things left unsaid. In fact, Leoville had just pointed out a flaw in her work.

"I think I can teach you a few things."

"Is that true? Please—"

"Wait just a minute!" I jumped in to stop the two of them as they got excited. "That's all well and good, but don't lose sight of our objective."

"Right... I forgot." Leoville finally came back to his senses.

"Actually, adulterated wine is being sold in the town of Montrose. It seems Simon, the second generation of Saint-Emilion who controls the distribution, is behind it... Do you know anything?" I asked, cutting to the chase.

Immediately, Marie's expression darkened, and she fell silent. As I thought, she knew something.

"If that kind of wine goes out into the world... it will eventually stain the name of Montrose. I think it would ruin everything your father worked so hard for."

Her shoulders trembled slightly.

"It'll be too late once the adulterated wine is out there. A name isn't valuable just because it's famous. You keep making the best things possible, and if luck is on your side, the name eventually gains respect. Building that trust takes long, long years of effort, but a single betrayal is enough to tear it all down. That betrayal is what Simon—no, Saint-Emilion—is trying to commit right now. Now is the only chance to stop it."

I stopped speaking and waited.

"...I've heard strange rumors from fellow craftsmen," she whispered, still looking down. "Mr. Simon buys wine at a higher price than the previous generation. At first, his reputation wasn't bad among the craftsmen... but soon, rumors started that something was being done to the wine. They said that when they drank the wine they were supposed to have made in town, the taste had changed. But... we don't have any proof."

I see. It was a clever scheme. If Simon could keep the costs low through adulteration, he could afford to buy the wine at a slightly higher price and still make a massive profit. As a result, since the craftsmen were getting paid more than before, they couldn't easily complain. That’s why the craftsmen at the other workshops we visited wouldn't say anything.

"But then, that extra amount you're being paid... isn't it like hush money to make you accomplices?"

"Hush money...?!" Marie started to protest my bluntness.

"...That might be true. But then, what should we do...?"

Yes, that was the problem. If we couldn't get any proof even after asking the craftsmen... in the end, would it come down to force?

As we struggled for an answer, she let out a sigh, regained her composure, and looked up with a smile. "If you haven't decided, why don't you stay at my place for tonight? We can think about it together there. It'll be hard to get back to town now, and I have extra rooms. Besides—" She turned a smile toward Leoville. "I’d really like to ask for that lecture on winemaking."

And so, we ended up staying at Marie’s workshop that night. The night passed peacefully. We had a dinner that wasn't exactly luxurious but was delicious. By the way, grapes were served at the table too, but grapes for winemaking and grapes for eating are apparently a bit different, so they didn't taste as good as I had hoped.

Afterward, Leoville gave Marie a practical lecture on winemaking. Naga and I were chatting in the small dining room. I had a bit of hot wine and was feeling nice and warm.

"I'll go get some air."

"Your speech is slurring, Lina."

"Shurrup."

With that, I left the room. The living quarters were inside the workshop building. I opened a few doors, passed through a few rooms, and intended to go outside—but I must have made a mistake somewhere, because I ended up in a corner of the workspace.

Deep inside, in a separate area, Leoville and Marie were working on some preparation. For some reason, I stopped where I was.

"—Do you understand this much?"

"Yes," came their voices.

"Shall we take a short break?" Leoville paused his work and sat on a nearby chair, his back turned to me.

Toward that back, Marie whispered, "...Big brother..."

Leoville’s shoulders trembled slightly! Though he didn't turn around, Marie continued. "Actually, I... I’m supposed to have an older brother who was separated from me long ago. It was when I was very little, so I don't remember his face well... but apparently, my father tried to drill the ways of winemaking into him, and he hated the harsh teaching and left home... Just now, it suddenly occurred to me... the name is different, but I started thinking that maybe you, Leoville-san, are my brother..."

Leoville didn't answer. But my eyes caught the clear sign of agitation in his back.

(Adulterated Wine Expedition: To be continued)

Adulterated Wine Expedition: Part 2

The air inside the room was heavy. Every single craftsman gathered there had a deep furrow in their brow, making their already sharp features look even more intense. Lina and Naga, on their journey, had helped a wandering winemaker named Leoville. The reason for the wrinkles was the cup placed before them.

Montrose and its surroundings were hidden gems of wine production. However, sophisticated counterfeit wine, bulked up with additives, was being sold there! The three of them concluded that this was the work of Simon Saint-Emilion, the wine broker. They raided the collection point and learned of the existence of D'Yquem, the evil cocktail master assisting Saint-Emilion. Simon had evaded them with slippery excuses.

To find proof of the adulterated wine, Lina and the others began questioning the nearby wine workshops. There, they met Marie, a girl trying to protect the workshop of her deceased father. She wondered if Leoville might be her long-lost brother—

The cups were filled with a red liquid. It was about three days after we had first visited Marie's workshop. We were at a small inn in a tiny village. It was a standard setup with a dining room on the first floor and rooms above, but given the village's size, it was hard to imagine it was ever busy. Yet now, the entire first floor was rented out, filled with over twenty men and women. This was probably the biggest crowd this inn had ever seen.

Most of them were middle-aged men—the wine craftsmen of the neighborhood Marie had called together. Before getting to the main point, the innkeeper brought out wine for a toast. As soon as they tasted it, everyone fell silent, their brows furrowing. Yes. What was served to them was none other than the adulterated wine Saint-Emilion was selling.

"Is this your work?" Marie called out resonantly.

"Is this the wine of Montrose?" Leoville followed up with his own question.

While the craftsmen remained speechless, Marie looked around the group. "I run a small wine workshop in the village of Blanc. It might be easier for you to understand if I say I am the daughter of Latour," she said, using her late father's name. "And he—"

she pointed to the man in black beside her, "—is the wandering winemaker who happened to be in town, Leoville-Haut-Brion."

At the mention of Leoville's name, groans leaked from the craftsmen. To me, this guy just looked like a thug in black, but in the world of winemaking, he was a legend known to those in the know. I still didn't quite get what that meant, though.

Naga and I were just sitting quietly in a corner. I was the one who had thought of the plan to deal with Saint-Emilion's nonsense, but the persuasion here was Marie and Leoville's job.

"Some of you may know. This is what Saint-Emilion is selling as Montrose wine. It contains additives," Leoville declared, looking around the room. The craftsmen began to buzz. Some had suspected it, while others hadn't. Some opened their eyes in shock; others guiltily averted their gaze.

Leoville continued regardless. "It has the taste and scent of wine. I suppose you could call it a well-made cocktail, and some might drink it as such. But can you call this wine? Can you stand tall and say this is the result of your work—your own wine? People will think *this* is the wine of Montrose. Are you okay with that?"

He looked over the craftsmen with a sincere gaze. No one answered. Then Marie spoke.

"My late father used to say that wine is, in a sense, like one's own child. I don't quite understand a parent's feelings yet... but I started to wonder... what if the wine my father made and left behind was being sold after its quantity was increased with additives? Wouldn't that be denying my father's life itself?"

She went silent for a moment, then gave a small sniffle. "The wine you all pour your hearts into making is also being sold after its quality has been lowered. If Simon Saint-Emilion, the current head, truly valued our wine and bought it at a high price, that would be fine. But... someone told me. If he bought it at a high price just to tell us not to say anything about the additives, then that's the same as hush money."

The reactions were varied. Some remained silent and averted their eyes; others flushed with anger. In any case, no one came forward to defend Saint-Emilion.

"Then we'll go and negotiate directly with Master Simon!" one of them shouted.

"Stop," Leoville cut in quietly. "He'll just give you some polite excuses and ask for evidence. He intends to play dumb. Even if everyone here goes to negotiate, he'll just

make empty promises on the spot, or claim he was planning to handle drinks other than wine as well. You'll just be talked in circles."

"Then what the hell are we supposed to do?!"

"It's simple," Leoville said. "Just don't sell your wine to Saint-Emilion."

"Wait... even if you say that, he's the only wine broker around here."

Leoville replied flatly to the point, "If there's no other broker, then we just make one."

The craftsmen sighed at this. "That's easy for you to say. But what about the funds and the manpower? If we leave it to someone who doesn't know wine and they ruin it during transport, that would be the worst case."

Then, Marie spoke up clearly. "I will start a brokerage."

Everyone's eyes fixed on her. "You aren't going to ask for money and people, are you?"

"It's true that I have no money right now. But I have the wine my father left behind. I will go to a distant town to sell some of it and create funds for purchasing. With that as a base, I should be able to make it work."

"Does that mean... you're closing your father's workshop?"

Marie gave a lonely smile at the question. "It will certainly be for the time being... but if the situation stabilizes, the day may come when I can reopen the workshop. On the other hand, if I do nothing here, my father's wine will be sold with additives forever. My father would surely be happier with the path I've chosen. I believe that."

She looked around the group with determination. Of course, no one there could argue with her resolve.

The next day, under the shade of a tree, a horse Marie had borrowed from a neighbor was munching on fodder. Nearby was an old wagon and a pile of straw. Inside the workshop, behind the doors, the wine transferred to shipping barrels was waiting.

Preparations were complete. Marie put her hands on her hips, looked around, and let out a sigh. It wasn't even noon yet. If she left now, she would reach the town where she planned to sell the wine before nightfall... but in that case, the expense of an inn

would add up. The plan was to leave early tomorrow morning, negotiate at noon, and return here by night.

"It’s finally tomorrow," Marie said with a somewhat excited tone, turning toward us. "I’ll go prepare lunch soon."

"If it’s lunch, then I, Naga the White Serpent, shall help too!"

"Um, Naga-san, I appreciate the help, but please stop drinking the wine under the guise of 'tasting' it..."

With such conversation, the two went into the workshop, leaving Leoville and me in the autumn breeze.

"She’s quite enthusiastic," I murmured.

"She’s likely nervous," Leoville said.

"But still... she said she intended to inherit the workshop at first. I'm surprised she agreed so readily to starting a brokerage."

"Don't speak as if it's someone else's problem. This was your idea, wasn't it?" Leoville pointed out.

"Well, I suppose it was," I admitted with a shrug.

Leoville fell silent for a moment before speaking. "...I've been teaching Marie winemaking for the past few days, and it seemed she felt the weight of her own inexperience. She worried that even if she made wine, it wouldn't measure up to her father's. She wondered if selling inferior wine would truly protect the workshop. It was likely that internal conflict that drove her to agree to this plan."

"Well... if her father, or someone even more skilled, were close by to help her, things might be different..." I scratched my head. "...And, I know it's none of my business, but I happened to overhear a bit ago. About you being... her long-lost brother—"

"That—!" Leoville's face flushed crimson for an instant. He turned toward me, let out a long sigh, and said crossly, "...That is not an issue for you to stick your nose into."

He turned on his heel grumpily and walked back toward the workshop. I let out a small sigh, feeling a lingering sense of unease, though he was certainly right.

The wagon rattled along the autumn road. Though the sky was clear, the morning air felt chilly. Marie was the sole driver. Apparently, she had experience hauling goods for her father in the past. At a glance, the cargo on the wagon looked like a mountain of straw. The true cargo was the wine barrels, but even on a mountain road in autumn, long exposure to direct sunlight risked raising the temperature of the wine and ruining its quality. The straw was there to prevent that.

Leaving the village at dawn, passing through the town of Montrose, and heading toward the next town along the highway to sell the wine—her handling of the reins was quite respectable.

Indeed, if her business got on track, it would be a fatal blow to Saint-Emilion. *If* it got on track, that is.

The wagon rattled along. The trees lining both sides of the road grew denser. Knowing our movements, Saint-Emilion had likely sent thugs to lie in wait. Naga and I had secretly followed Marie, discovered the hidden ruffians, and struck them down.

Suddenly! A blast erupted among the trees! The horse neighed, and Marie scrambled to handle the reins. As she managed to calm the horse and looked toward the source of the noise, figures emerged from the smoke-filled thicket onto the highway.

"Ha! Just as I read it!"

"You probably thought you were being clever with your schemes, but a villain's thoughts are transparent to me! Ho-ho-ho-ho!"

It was none other than me, Lina Inverse, and Naga the White Serpent!

"So... I really was being ambushed?" Marie asked.

I gave a casual V-sign. Truth be told, this was the real counter-measure I had prepared against Saint-Emilion. The unification of the winemakers would take time to show results. However, if we could repel the attackers here and get them to confess that Saint-Emilion was the mastermind, everything would be solved.

"Well, we'll tie these guys up and take them to town to make them confess. You go on ahead and do your best selling the wine."

"Yes. I'll leave them to you then."

Marie bowed and set the wagon back into motion. Naga and I exchanged a nod as we watched her go. The sun was approaching its zenith, and the wind was beginning to carry a bit of heat.

It was roughly noon, but there was still some distance to the town. The wagon continued at its steady rattle.

Crackle... A nearby thicket shook slightly. Neither Marie nor the horse took notice as they moved along.

Zazazaza! Shadows leaped from the swaying brush! Six men in front of the wagon, four behind. Men with scarves covering the lower halves of their faces, clutching machetes and clubs in their hands.

"Who are you—?!"

Before Marie's scream even finished, the men charged toward the wagon! In that instant—

"Freeze Arrow!"

Two voices rang out in unison! What followed were the screams and startled shouts of the men!

"Ho-ho-ho-ho! To think you'd believe you could outwit Naga the White Serpent just by placing a vanguard as a decoy! You've underestimated me!"

The ones who emerged from the trees were, of course, Naga and I!

The men, frozen and unable to move, were not unconscious. Their eyes followed our movements. I stepped out from the brush toward them. "I expected at least two rounds of ambushes."

"How... why...?" one of the men asked, his voice trembling—perhaps from the cold, or perhaps from frustration.

"It's simple. First, Leoville was attacked in the mountains. Thinking back, that was strange."

"Strange...?"

"Look at Leoville's outfit. Do you really think bandits would go out of their way to attack a thug-like guy who looks like he has no money?"

"Lina, he'd be angry if he heard that," Naga chuckled behind me. The man in question was currently house-sitting at Marie's workshop.

"So, who attacked Leoville? I figured someone heard rumors he was heading to Montrose and worried that their wine adulteration would be exposed. They had thugs pretend to be bandits to attack him. If that 'someone' was Saint-Emilion, then he'd know Naga and I were with Marie and that his thugs couldn't beat us. So, what would he do? He'd first send hired thugs through untraceable channels as disposable pawns. If the attack succeeded, great. If it failed, he'd expect us to let our guard down. Then, his main force—you guys—would strike. I said we were taking the first group to town just to lower your guard, since I figured you were watching from somewhere. Well, there might even be a third wave, but that would just be a waste of time. So..."

I stood before one of the men and ripped away the scarf covering his mouth. Revealed beneath was the face of one of Saint-Emilion's personal thugs I had met at the diner in Montrose.

"Time for a game of reverse chicken! The first person to tell me everything gets off scot-free." I let a wicked grin spread across my face. "But for the rest of you, who refuse to talk out of loyalty to an employer who won't even cover for you... I'll use attack spells until you wish you were dead."

Before my words even finished, the men began blabbing about Simon Saint-Emilion's crimes all at once, like baby birds chirping for food.

A stir spread through the crowd. In a corner of Montrose stood the Saint-Emilion wine collection point. The gatekeeper who momentarily tried to stop us, as well as the workers in the courtyard, all froze and turned their eyes toward us. It was no wonder. The familiar thugs who were usually at the center of things were now tied together in a long line and being hauled along.

The ones hauling them were, of course, the four of us: Naga, Leoville, Marie, and myself. But that wasn't all. Behind the captured thugs followed over a dozen wine craftsmen from the neighboring villages, their faces visible with suppressed rage.

Detecting the commotion outside, a group emerged from the building—a group including faces I recognized. A middle-aged man in his fifties let out a cry of shock upon seeing us. Needless to say, this man was the mastermind behind the adulterated wine incident, Simon Saint-Emilion. The blood drained from his face. Standing beside him with a gloomy expression was D'Yquem, the man who had presumably provided the technique for the wine.

Simon looked at the bound thugs. "...What is the meaning of this?"

"Do I really have to explain?" I asked dismissively. He remained silent for a moment before speaking.

"...Did those men do something?"

Oh? He still intended to play dumb even at this stage. I had to admit, his stubbornness was impressive. I pointed at the thugs. "These guys already talked. They told us everything. About you adulterating the wine. And about how you attacked Marie when you realized she was going to interfere."

"I see. Is that how it is?" Simon twisted the corner of his mouth bitterly and gestured toward the thugs. "Actually, those men had behavioral issues, so I fired them just the other day."

The thugs began to stir—I see. So that was his play.

"They likely hold a grudge against me, or perhaps they think their own punishment will be lighter if they claim I put them up to it. It's nothing but a fabrication."

So he was going to slip away with excuses to the very end. I sighed and glanced at Naga. On that signal—

"Ho-ho-ho-ho! It seems you can't even remember what you've been doing!" Naga shouted at the top of her lungs! With a gaze and voice full of utter contempt, she continued, "Then I'll explain from the beginning so you can remember! You took the wine everyone worked so hard to make and bulked it up with clumsy additives to make a profit! Well, from Naga the White Serpent's perspective, calling that stuff 'wine' is more than just offensive—I'm almost impressed by your nerve! It's a half-baked mess that doesn't deserve the name. The tannins weren't properly handled, and the harshness of the alcohol just clings to the tongue. A child mixing juice randomly could do better than that!"

"Silence!"

The one who cut Naga off with a shout of rage was D'Yquem, who had been standing silently behind Simon!

Yes! Just as planned! I thought. Simon aside, I figured a man with as much useless pride as D'Yquem would fall for the provocation. It was even more effective coming from Naga, who looked like the poster child for a life gone wrong.

"D'Yquem!" Simon tried to stop him, but D'Yquem was no longer listening. He glared at Naga. "Enough of your baseless insults! No such complaints have come from the taverns! Even among the winemakers, though some noticed the taste had changed, not a single one saw through it! That—"

"D'Yquem!"

"—That it was a cocktail!" he finished.

Simon dropped to his knees in despair. D'Yquem looked down at him. "...Don't hold it against me. You were finished either way. Even if you had successfully made excuses here, the craftsmen would never have sold you wine again."

He then turned his gaze toward us. "Since I've been seen through, I shall admit defeat. But I lost only to the palate of one who realized this was a cocktail. In other words, I won against the fools who couldn't tell the difference—these dim-witted craftsmen around here."

The craftsmen began to stir in anger, but I raised a hand to restrain them. D'Yquem maintained a triumphant gaze. "You call it 'adulteration,' but it's no joke. The reason the craftsmen felt something was off was only because the taste differed from what they were used to. If they had been told it was wine imported from elsewhere, they wouldn't have noticed a thing, would they?"

He let a smirk play on the corners of his mouth. The craftsmen's eyes filled with murderous intent as they closed in on him.

"I hope you aren't about to say something absurd like 'pay for your crimes.' Don't misunderstand. Ultimately, if someone can't tell if it's wine or a cocktail, it's the same as the real thing to them. I merely taught my employer how to make a cocktail that's the spitting image of wine. How he sold it is his responsibility. I haven't done a single thing that the law can touch me for."

"You're the one who shouldn't misunderstand," I said, a smirk of my own appearing.

He threw a look of contempt at the craftsmen and began to walk away, rounding past us toward the gate. "Where do you think you're going?" I asked.

He replied flatly, "My employer has been publicly shamed, so I have no more business here. I'm leaving. That's all."

"Oh? And you think we'll just quietly see you off?"

"...What?" D'Yquem's expression froze.

"I'm not talking about the law. I'm just saying... I have no reason to stop these craftsmen you were just mocking from doing whatever they want with you."

The cry of a man who fell into the dark side of cocktails echoed under the autumn sky.

The trouble was settled and the sun went down. To celebrate the resolution of the incident and the new beginning for Montrose, a plan emerged to rent out a diner and throw a party for all the local winemakers. Naga, Leoville, and I were invited as the heroes of the hour. Of course, there was no reason to decline such an invitation.

Meat, fish, and vegetables were crowded onto the tables, and wine flowed freely. Once the alcohol kicked in, the boasting and tall tales began. But the stars of the day were Leoville and Marie, sitting side by side. Surrounded by craftsmen, the conversation flourished.

"But are you really closing the workshop? It's a shame," one of the craftsmen said to Marie, his face red from drink.

I didn't miss the opportunity and chimed in from the side. "It really is. If only there were even one skilled craftsman nearby, she might be able to manage both the workshop and the brokerage, even on a small scale. For example, if a long-lost brother had honed his skills and returned..."

"Ah." "Ugh."

The two of them groaned at my words. The craftsman who had been listening burst into a loud laugh. "A long-lost brother? That'd be nice! But Marie-chan is an only child, so that's just wishing for the impossible, isn't it?"

"...Eh...?"

The air froze. Only around the three of us—Lina, Leoville, and Marie. The red-faced craftsman didn't notice the atmosphere at all. "Well, I've known Marie-chan's father since forever, and he wasn't the type to go having secret children elsewhere! That's a pipe dream if I ever heard one!"

I turned my gaze toward Leoville. "...But Leoville... if you aren't her brother..."

"That's wrong!"

He cut me off, raised his voice, and looked me straight in the eye with determination.

"It shouldn't be 'big brother' (Onii-san)... it should be 'dear brother' (Onii-chan)!"

"...Hah?" I felt my own brow furrow.

Marie, listening to this, suddenly had her eyes light up. She lunged at Leoville's arm. "Dear brother! If it's okay with you, would you stay here and help me?!"

"W-well, now that I know, I can't look away!"

Leoville's face showed clear agitation as she clung to him. Naga also lunged at him and leaned in close. "Hah. Dear brother. I'd be fine with about fifty gold coins."

"If you do that, we can protect my father's workshop, and I can be with my dear brother forever. Is that okay, dear brother?"

Leoville looked at Naga and me with a somber expression. He was silent for a moment. "No. That doesn't suit you guys."

"...So, Leoville... basically, being called 'dear brother' was your weak point, so you didn't deny it... that's how it is, isn't it?" I pressed.

"Indeed, that is the heart of it."

He sounded like a hopeless man with a very specific fetish...

"However, you must be sure to call me 'dear brother'!"

"Yes! I understand, dear brother!"

"I can't take this anymore!" I pressed my fingers to my temples. He had given in so easily! And he looked incredibly relaxed!

I felt a lack of clarity about the whole thing, but Naga and I simply gorged ourselves on the food on the table, treating it as our reward.

(Adulterated Wine Expedition: End)

Sitting Duck: Part 1

It was a mountain scene like any other. The wind rustled the leaves, the birds sang, and the bandits chirped their textbook lines.

"Hey, if you leave what needs leavin', we won't go takin' your life. Like that big jewel on your shoulder guard... hehe."

A bandit of the most common style—bald and shirtless, the kind you'd find at least one of in any household—was reciting his standard threats. A desolate highway through the mountains. Bandits surrounding a beautiful young mage. I thought it was just part of the usual pattern.

The voice that rang out in the next moment, in a world of stylized beauty that could almost be called traditional, was what I first thought was a man's voice, accompanied by the sound of approaching hooves.

"Wait, wait, waaaaaaaait!"

Everyone turned to look. Beyond the highway stretching between the trees, a single horse appeared. Was the glimpse of a young warrior in armor a preconception brought on by the cliché? In reality, only the galloping horse was visible. There was no person on its back, and yet—

"Waaaaait!"

The man's voice drew closer with the hooves. The bandits and I stepped to the side of the road, and the horse galloped through the gap. In that instant, I saw it. A warrior in light armor of blue and gold, with a sword on his back, being dragged behind the horse with the reins wrapped around his right hand.

Our eyes met. The man's shouts to stop the horse turned into a plea directed at me.

"Heeeeeeelp!"

I reflexively looked at the bandits—they also had troubled faces and shook their heads from side to side.

"Fireball!"

I fired the attack spell I had been chanting for the bandits toward the horse instead!

I wondered if I should check on him...

"Ah... wait a moment. I'm going to check on that guy."

The released orb of light struck the ground right next to the horse and man, exploding and scattering flames! The man fell face-first onto the ground, while the horse flipped gracefully in the air and landed perfectly on its four legs! *Wait, what's with that horse?!* The horse glanced back at me for a moment, then trotted away down the highway as if nothing had happened. I stared after its retreating form for a long, long time.

The reins must have broken or come loose. The man remained collapsed on the spot. The End.

I gave a brief word of explanation to the bandits. They put on the best smiles they could manage and said, one after another:

"Oh, no, please don't mind us." "Don't worry about us at all." "I have a part-time job starting now, so..."

As they turned on their heels and began to walk away—

"Fireball."

Boom. My second attack spell. No, I wasn't going to let them off just because they tried to act casual. I'd scavenge their wallets later, but for now, I walked over to the warrior.

"...Ugh..." He was twitching and squirming, but he still looked toward me.

I immediately said, "That was a close one. But you're safe now. I've saved you."

I called out to the man before he could even open his mouth.

I took a good look at him; his armor and sword were of fine make, and the clothes he wore beneath the plate didn't look cheap either.

"I am Hermes Libton. As you can see, I am a traveling warrior by trade."

Usually, one wouldn't expect to encounter such an endangered species—a truly earnest, naive noble-type—out in the wild, but there he was.

The truth was, in this world, there were some people who, for some reason, would start complaining the moment I rescued them. It was probably just because my basic policy of "choosing whatever means necessary to save them" didn't quite mesh with their personal lifestyle habits. Regardless, in these situations, it was tactically effective to state clearly and firmly that I had saved them, thereby cutting off any potential argument before it started.

".....Was that... oh... Thank you... very much....." Hermes stammered.

"I'm Lina. Lina Inverse. A mage, as you can see."

I was just beginning to calculate how much to charge him for my services when—

"Is something the matter?" Hermes asked, his eyes clear and devoid of suspicion.

"Well, I just wanted to know... how exactly did you end up in that situation?" I asked. Whether it was the quality of the armor or the man’s own stubborn tenacity, he had remained remarkably unscathed.

"I was in a hurry," he explained.

"Why the rush?"

"Well, actually..." He looked around—perhaps he was worried about the bandits knocked out nearby, or perhaps he was simply someone who didn't know the "market price" for a life. "I realize this may be a paltry sum for saving my life, but please, accept this as a token of my gratitude."

Before I could even demand payment, he pulled a stuffed leather pouch from his coat and handed it over. This actually caught me off guard. With a rough breath and a smile, he looked at me.

"Eh? Are you sure?"

My hand was already reaching for the bag before the question was even finished. Based on the weight, there was no doubt: the contents were gold coins.

"No, really. If you hadn't come along, I don't know what would have happened to me."

After I finished rummaging through the bandits' pockets and healed his wounds with a recovery spell, the warrior bowed his head to me.

"Yes. Of course."

He gave me a bright smile. I blinked and looked around. *Well, he's honest, at least.* He looked to be around twenty. His black hair was kept short and tidy, and he had a face that possessed a certain refined quality. It wasn't surprising I had thought so; in this harsh world, finding someone so good-natured and generous in a place like this felt like some kind of trap.

In response to my questioning look, he tightened his expression. "Yes. Actually, there is a place I must get to in a hurry. I bought the fastest horse in the nearby town, but it bolted before I could even mount it, and... well, that happened."

"Let's talk while we walk," I suggested, and we started down the highway. He leaned in close and lowered his voice. "I might be able to get my hands on the legendary Sword of the Red Dragon."

"The Sword of the Red Dragon...?" I muttered, knitting my brows.

There are many legendary weapons—the Sword of Light, the Blast Sword, the Galveira [2]. But the "Sword of the Red Dragon" was considered a legend among legends. It was said to be the sword held by the Red Dragon God Ceifeed during the battle between Ceifeed and the Ruby-Eye Demon King Shabranigdu, where the survival of the world was at stake.

Of course, "legendary" often meant it didn't actually exist, but it wasn't impossible.

I glanced back toward the direction Hermes had come from. I had walked from that town too, and the distance was considerable. *Had this man really been dragged by a horse that entire way?*

Hermes pulled a scroll from his coat and held it out. "Actually, while I was staying at an inn yesterday, this letter arrived."

Thinking it suspicious, I took it and spread it open. It was written in a hand that couldn't be called "good" even with flattery.

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[2] And with that the dark star weapons are canon to slayers the novels too.

"Yo, it's me. Me! Anyway, I happened to pick this thing up recently. But I don't use stuff like this, so it's a waste to just keep it, right? Then I remembered you were a warrior. I'd feel bad just giving it away for free, so how about 500 gold coins? If you want it, come get it. The location is Torque City—"

"LIAR!" I screamed, slamming the scroll into the ground.

"Aah?! What are you doing, Lina-san?!" Hermes cried out.

"Don't 'What are you doing' me! This thing is oozing fakery from every fiber!"

".....Eh? Fake?" Hermes looked stunned for a second, then looked at me with a serious face. "You mean... the things written here are lies?"

"Look at it! Where is the credibility?! Where?!"

He looked at the scroll lingeringly. "Actually, when I first started taking on jobs, I used to get stomach aches before going to work. Just then, I met a kind person who had this magic sword!"

"Magic sword?"

At my mutter, he spoke proudly. "Yes! A blade forged by a legendary Dwarven smith. It’s said to have a blessing spell on it so that 'the wielder won't get stomach aches before work'!"

I looked at the sword on his back. *I see. So, basically, he got scammed. Big time.*

"That's a fake. A total counterfeit," I stated flatly. "It was expensive, wasn't it...?"

"Actually, for a magic sword, I got it at an incredibly low price!"

I see. So it was outrageously expensive for a regular sword then.

"You're being tricked. You are definitely being tricked, mister."

Needless to say, his "magic" was just a matter of "mind over matter." However, since knowing the truth wouldn't necessarily benefit him, I decided to keep quiet about the sword for now.

Instead, I rubbed my temples. ".....Well, setting that aside... this 'me' in the letter! Someone who doesn't even give their name but offers a 'good deal'—that's suspicious regardless of whether you trust people or not!"

Hermes stared at the document. "The handwriting and this casual tone... it's exactly like my gardener's."

"What kind of gardener do you have?! Wait, did you say 'my' gardener?"

"Ah. Well, since I ran away from home, I suppose 'former' gardener would be more accurate."

".....Ah. In other words..." I pressed a finger to my temple. "...You're the pampered son of a noble or a wealthy merchant, and you ran away to be a traveling warrior?"

"How did you know, Lina-san?!"

".....I... well, I just knew....."

I answered vaguely, looking away. *This is a bad pattern*. It happens sometimes—second or third sons of nobles who get bored with their peaceful lives and set out to "live for themselves." Some succeed, but...

While I'm a mage, I know my way around a sword. From my estimation, Hermes seemed like he could actually use a blade based on his movements. But his innocence—or rather, his gullibility and pure stupidity—seemed fatally high.

I could have just told him "good luck" and parted ways right there. However, I was already planning on heading to Torque City myself. If that was the case, it might be interesting to give him a bit of a "social education" while tracking down the con artist who sent this pathetic letter.

"This might be... a conspiracy," I said, pretending to think deeply.

As expected, Hermes's eyes lit up. "A conspiracy?"

"Yes! Someone might be trying to lure you into a foul trap!"

He nodded vigorously, his cheeks flushed. *Heh! He's completely on my pace now!* I had guessed that someone who chose this line of work seeking excitement without knowing the world would be fired up by words like "conspiracy," and I was spot on!

"Exactly! And you can only truly stand on your own as a full-fledged adventurer if you crush this conspiracy!"

"An adventurer!" Flames of passion burned in his eyes.

I lowered my voice slightly. "Yes. But don't misunderstand. A 'full-fledged adventurer' isn't someone who can do everything alone. It's someone who knows what they can and cannot do. Someone who can find companions to fill in the gaps!"

"What you lack right now is, quite simply, a supporter who can use spells! Of course, no one appears as a 'true companion' from the very start. At first, you might hire them as support for money, but while building that connection, a 'True Bond' is born!"

"Ohhhhh! A True Bond!" Hermes looked at me with eyes sparkling like a child's.

Alright! I pointed toward Torque City. "Now! Go, Hermes! To crush the evil conspiracy!"

He looked toward our destination. "Yes! Um, Lina-san!"

"What?"

"If it's alright with you, could you assist me until this matter is resolved?!"

"For how much?!"

"I'll pay 100 gold coins!"

"Deal!"

Torque City was still a ways off. If we walked, we would arrive tomorrow afternoon. For now, we headed toward the center of the town of Besmi to find an inn for the night.

Just as the sun dipped below the horizon and the darkness began to thicken...

"What?!"

"Ho. So it's you. The man trying to get his hands on the Sword of the Red Dragon."

A woman’s voice rang through the night sky. Hermes turned, and I followed his gaze. There, standing atop a row of barrels in the yard of a nearby house, were two standing silhouettes!

"Now what?"

"I'm not being tricked right now, am I, Lina-san?" Hermes asked nervously.

"You're fine! I guarantee it!"

"Oh, good! I felt uneasy for a second for no reason!"

I muttered in my heart as we both stared at them: *No, you ARE being tricked.*

The silhouettes weren't quite high enough to be imposing, but as I was wondering whether or not to make a quip about their awkward positioning...

"We will not let that sword fall into your hands!"

One of the shadows, a tall man, spoke. I could tell from his voice he was still young, but he was wrapped in a black cloak, and his face was covered from the nose up by a mask fashioned after a demon. "That is not something a mere common warrior should possess."

The other shadow was a woman—the one who had spoken first. She also wore a cloak and a mask shaped like a crow. Both had hair as dark as the night visible beneath their masks.

Hermes looked at the woman. "Eh? Really?"

"DON'T JUST BELIEVE THEM!"

I immediately pulled out a wooden clog and smacked Hermes on the head!

"This is where you're supposed to ask about their identity and goals while being pressured by their aura! That's the theory! I'm not saying it's bad to break the mold, but...!"

"I... I see..."

"There is absolutely no path where you just accept it and nod!”
“Why do you even have a wooden clog, Lina-san?"

"I found it on the road!" I lied.

Note: It’s just convenient for delivering a punchline.

"I see..."

This guy... I can't tell if he's just honest or if he's just a black hole of comedic timing.

The two masked figures whispered to each other, looking a bit troubled, before the "Demon Mask" cleared his throat.

"In short, Hermes... to put it simply, we, the evil organization 'Bottomless Pit,' are going to get the Sword of the Red Dragon before you and do something... evil... with it."

He actually called himself an "evil organization."

"What?!" Finally, the flames of justice lit in Hermes's eyes. "I won't let you do that!"

"Heh. Then what will you do?!" The man flourished his cloak into the darkness. "You don't think you can defeat Diabolo the Demon and—"

The woman also let her cloak flutter. "—and Crow, by yourself, do you?"

After saying this, they looked between Hermes and me. "...Um. I said 'by yourself,' but what about that woman over there?"

"She's the person helping me! Even though she hits me with a wooden clog sometimes!"

The two masked figures whispered together again. "Fine!" Diabolo sneered. "If you think you can stop our scheme, then try it! However... it's late today, so we'll start all that tomorrow!"

With a line like a kid with strict parents and a curfew, he flourished his cloak and hopped down from the barrels. "We'll see you then."

Crow followed suit, and both vanished into the shadows of the house.

".....Ah." As if suddenly remembering something, Hermes turned to me. "Should I have chased them?"

".....Well... whatever works....." I scratched my head lazily. "Anyway, a question. Did you notice anything?"

"Eh? Notice something?" He thought for a moment, then looked up. "Now that you mention it! You're surprisingly bossy, aren't you, Lina-san!"

"NOT THAT!"

After delivering a punch to his face with the wooden clog, I let out a small sigh. ".....I could give you the answer, but you need to get into the habit of thinking for yourself. Remember exactly how that exchange went. Anyway, let's go find an inn."

"Okay..." He groaned, holding his nose. *I wonder if he really gets it.*

The next morning, the air was sharp and cold. I wrapped myself in my cloak.

After a "light" breakfast of soup, bread, ham, salad, eggs, bacon, fish, and juice, we left the inn to head toward Torque City.

"Ah, you! You're Hermes Libton, aren't you?!"

A woman in the crowd called out. Hermes recoiled slightly. "Ah... yes. I am."

"Ho-ho-ho-ho! As you can see, I am just a very ordinary, virtuous town girl!"

I stood there, speechless. *Normal? In what world?*

Even if she wasn't wearing her usual weird clothes, there was no hiding that identity when she came charging in with that laugh. It was none other than the woman who called herself my rival, though I didn't really care: Naga the White Serpent!

"Ho-ho-ho-ho-ho-ho!"

Naga, the "self-proclaimed ordinary town girl," tossed her long black hair. "Just now, while I was passing by, two people in demon and crow masks caught my younger brother! They told me to tell you to come alone to the abandoned house west of town!"

"What?! The 'Bottomless Pit' duo! To take a hostage just to get in my way... how despicable!"

Hermes barked and turned to me. "Since they said 'alone,' if the two of us go, the boy might be in danger! So, please let me go alone!"

"Mmm. Have fun," I said, waving lazily.

"Wait for me! I will definitely save your brother!" He shouted to Naga, then sprinted toward the west.

After watching him go, I turned to the "town girl" standing next to me. "What kind of performance was that supposed to be, Naga?"

She jumped back to create distance. "Hmph! As expected of Lina Inverse! I thought you might see through my disguise!"

"You know if it wasn't obvious just by their appearance, those two literally called themselves an 'evil organization…'"

"Oh? Is that so?" Naga frowned for a moment. "Well, I suppose it's true I was hired by them... but hmph! Judging people's goodness by their appearance is laughable, Lina! Those two helped me when I dropped my bag of discount bean sprouts from a bridge into the river! I owe them a debt of gratitude!"

I almost felt tears coming to my eyes at the details of her lifestyle.

"My role is to separate you from Hermes!"

Naga took a combat stance. I nodded casually. "Okay."

Naga fell silent for a moment. ".....Aren't you going to chase him?"

I crossed my arms. "Mmm. Hard to explain. But... no, I won't."

"Why?"

I muttered a few words under my breath, then cast a spell and attacked!

I didn't stop the "villains" last night, and I didn't point out Naga's lie about the hostage, all so that the world-ignorant Hermes could get some "social education." My "not chasing him" was just a lie to lower Naga's guard. I should at least keep a secret watch

over him from the shadows. Plus, if he gets into a pinch and I save him, my fee might go up!

I sprinted toward the west of town. The sound of clashing swords reached my ears on the morning wind.

I followed the sound to a small patch of trees. It looked like a forest, but I could see a roof peeking through. As I got closer, the sound of swordplay grew louder.

"Come on, what's wrong?! Is that all the strength you have?!" Diabolo's voice goaded.

I approached silently. Behind the trees was an abandoned house with a mossy roof. The garden had turned into a thicket of weeds.

Three shadows were clashing in the tall grass! Diabolo with his broadsword and Crow with her rapier. They glided through the field, their silver blades flashing. Beneath their cloaks, they wore black leather-like gear. Hermes was barely managing to fend them off with his longsword.

I hid behind a tree and observed. Diabolo and Crow clearly had energy to spare. If they really wanted to finish him, Hermes wouldn't last long. *But why aren't they?* And there was something else bothering me.

Naga. Usually, she'd bounce back from an attack spell in a heartbeat. The fact that there was no sign of her was eerie. But I decided to settle this before she showed up to complicate things.

I began to chant—

"Interference is unnecessary!"

Crow, having pulled back to take distance from Hermes, looked toward me and shouted.

I've been spotted!!

"If you still intend to interfere, we will consider you an enemy!"

From behind the crow mask, two eyes stared straight at me with unmistakable intent.

(Sitting Duck: To be continued!)

Next Time Preview:

Hermes turned out to be surprisingly skilled for someone who was dragged by a horse! And the masked duo are more than a match for him! Who are they really?! What is their true goal?! And where is Naga?!

The Sword of the Red Dragon... Well, that doesn't really matter, does it? It's a lie anyway.

Next time on *Slayers*: Sitting Duck (Part 2)

When you get a suspicious call, record it and wait!

Sitting Duck (Part 2)

The Story So Far:

Lina met Hermes Libton, a traveling warrior who happened to be a naive, pampered son of a noble family—and incredibly easy to fool. He was on his way to Torque City, tricked by an anonymous letter promising to sell him the legendary "Sword of the Red Dragon" for a bargain.

However, on his way, two people appeared: a man in a demon mask named Diabolo and a woman in a crow mask named Crow, self-proclaimed members of an evil organization! It was too late in the evening to fight, so they left, but the next morning, Naga (hired by the duo) attempted to separate Lina from Hermes!

After Lina took care of Naga and rushed to find Hermes, she found him already locked in combat with Diabolo and Crow! Lina was shocked to realize that all three possessed skill beyond her expectations. Just as she was about to provide cover with an offensive spell, Crow's eyes locked onto her position!

A massive explosion shook the morning air. Needless to say, it was a single offensive spell I had unleashed.

Diabolo had instantly scrambled up a tree to escape. I was impressed by his agility, but there’s always a moment of vulnerability when coming back down! I wasn't about to miss that opening!

"I suppose we can't hold back anymore," Crow said.

Behind her, in the overgrown yard of the abandoned house, Hermes and Diabolo—who had also managed to evade my spell—were still busy clashing blades. I wanted to go support him, but I couldn't move until I dealt with the opponent right in front of me. They were better than I expected, but I still had plenty of tricks up my sleeve.

I canceled the spell I was currently chanting and began reciting a different incantation.

"Whether they are friend or foe is a secondary concern!"

Naga stood beside me, guzzling wine in broad daylight and speaking with an insufferable air of self-importance.

"You should have just accepted it!" I snapped.

She was wearing that ridiculously revealing outfit—spiked shoulder guards, a skull pendant, and way too much skin showing. It was, without a doubt, Naga the White Serpent. She must have changed out of her "town girl" disguise and back into her usual gear while I was busy dealing with the others.

She stood on the roof, looking down at us. "Ho-ho-ho-ho!"

Crow had warned me that interfering would make me an enemy. I prepared myself. Crow's body suddenly sank low. At the same time, the branches of the trees swayed violently, leaves rustling.

Wait, what?!

If a wandering mage like me backed down every time someone threatened them, I wouldn't last a week in this business. Pretending to be intimidated, I secretly released a *Fireball*. The air cooked and the grass scorched. But even as the flames scattered, my eyes caught Crow leaping away by a hair's breadth.

I turned as I ran past. There stood Crow, having landed and swapped her rapier for a knife. She kicked off the ground and moved to my left, disappearing into the trees. An instant later, the leaves of the overgrown garden trees directly above me rustled, and I leapt backward!

She had used the spring of the branches and her own natural elasticity to come flying at me. If I had tried to intercept her poorly, I would have been in for a world of pain. A small, wind-splitting sound crossed through the fading echo of the explosion; a black projectile pierced the spot where I had been standing a moment ago!

Crow watched me from where she landed. "You dodged it. Not bad."

I began chanting a spell as I looked up. "I don't really want to meddle with bystanders... but if you're a skilled fighter, it's a different story."

"............Um....."

Hermes looked back and forth between us, pointing hesitantly at Naga.

"Is this person... actually making sense in some weird way, or did I just miss something?!"

By the way, Naga had decided to follow us of her own accord. Eventually, as Diabolo stood there wondering where to even begin poking holes in "Naga Logic," he let out a sigh. Well, since her particular "logic" is entirely invisible to anyone else, there wasn't much point in arguing.

Behind me, the roar of another offensive spell went off. *Seriously, Naga?*

"You're fired," Diabolo said flatly.

He was still being too soft on her.

"What do you mean 'fired'?!" Naga screamed. Her voice echoed as she flourished her cloak. "Don't think an attack like that will work on me twice!"

"Because you're annoying!"

"The people here are the one who blew me up and the one who fired me! That means you're all my enemies! Now, give up and show yourselves!"

"Wait, wait just a minute!"

Diabolo was the one who stood up to object. He held his mask in place as it nearly slipped off. He looked surprisingly energetic, though he was a bit wobbly on his feet.

"Does that mean you just fired that spell without even checking who was a friend and who was an enemy?!"

"Hmph! What a foolish question!" Naga flourished her cloak again. "The most important thing in battle is seizing the opportunity! Identifying who's who is a secondary concern!"

I stood there while the wind settled, looking up at the single silhouette standing tall on the roof of the abandoned house.

"Why, you ask? Well, there are plenty of reasons, but you wouldn't understand even if I told you..."

We were sitting in a restaurant in town, sipping juice. I gave a small nod to the question Hermes had asked. After Naga had fired that last spell, she had stepped through the very roof she was standing on and fallen through.

"She looks like the woman who came to me for help earlier... are they sisters or something?" Hermes asked.

".....No. It's the same person."

Just figure it out already.

When I had returned to the scene, all I found was a battered Hermes and a cracked demon mask. Diabolo and Crow were nowhere to be found.

At this point, I realized it wasn't just that Hermes was gullible—he literally didn't think about *anything*. I treated his wounds with a *Recovery* spell and ducked into a nearby shop for a break.

"Is that so!"

Ever since Naga told him "The most important thing in battle is seizing the opportunity," he had been acting like I'd just revealed a profound truth.

"Wait, then what about the younger brother who was captured?"

"That story was a lie."

"WHAAAT?!"

He turned toward Naga with a look of pure shock.

"Hmph. It’s true the hostage story was a fabrication. I was just asked by Diabolo to keep you and Lina apart."

"Is that true?!"

He nodded deeply at the answer, then turned a gaze of intense respect toward me. "You realized it so quickly, Lina-san!"

I didn't know why, but I felt like I was being insulted by his sheer stupidity. While I was holding my forehead to fight back a headache, Hermes pulled out that ridiculous fake letter and started showing it off to Naga.

".....Look at this, Naga-san! This is the letter!"

"Hmph! It certainly says 'Sword of the Red Dragon'!"

Naga's eyes were sparkling. *No... don't tell me... she believes it too?*

"Lina-san said this letter might be a fake, but if Diabolo and Crow came all this way to stop us from getting the sword—"

"That means the contents of this letter have become credible!" Naga finished.

No, they haven't. It's a total fake.

"If that's the case, I, Naga the White Serpent, shall lend you my strength!"

"Really?! Then this is just a small token of my thanks—"

"WAIT A SECOND!"

Things were spiraling out of control, so I had to jump in. Naga was already accepting a bag of gold coins from Hermes.

"What do you mean, 'What's the matter, Lina?' Why are you two suddenly acting like allies?!"

"Hmph. Perhaps you're worried your own role won't be as prominent?"

I realized then that trying to persuade these two was a lost cause.

According to the locals, the specialty dishes made with the lake's unique octopus and squid were more of an "acquired taste" than a delicacy, but I'd always wanted to try them. That was my original reason for coming here. I just happened to get mixed up in this mess on the way.

We left Besmi that morning and reached Torque City without any further complications. We stood at the edge of the city in the early afternoon.

"I was sure Diabolo and his partner would ambush us," Hermes muttered.

The city faced a lake and had grown through fishing and farming. While farming had declined as the population grew, the fishing industry was still thriving.

"They probably took more damage from Naga this morning than I thought," I remarked.

"Hmph! Then we should just go receive the Sword of the Red Dragon right now!"

"That's it! As expected of Naga-san!" Hermes said, impressed by her nonsense.

".....And?" I asked dryly. "Where in this city, at what time, and with whom are we supposed to meet?"

Their expressions froze. Hermes scrambled to pull out the fake letter.

".....Lina-san. I just noticed something."

"What?" I asked, without any expectation.

"Anonymous letters are really inconvenient at times like this!"

"Oh. You just realized that."

I was making half-hearted conversation, feeling incredibly exhausted, when Naga spoke up with her usual arrogance.

"You're both still so inexperienced! In cases like this, you usually just take a room at an inn and wait; the other party will eventually approach you! So, first, we should find a luxurious inn with your money!"

"Is that how it works?!"

"Of course it—oh! They're already here!"

Halfway through Naga's sentence, a familiar voice rang out. Coming from the direction of the city center were Diabolo and Crow.

Crow looked the same as she did that morning, but Diabolo—if I could still call him that—was wearing a completely different, unrecognizable mask. It was a pitch-black, flat face with several tentacles or noodles hanging from the bottom.

"You two?!" Hermes shouted, drawing his sword. "Are you from 'Bottomless Pit'? Wait... I don't see Diabolo anywhere..."

"NOTICE HIM ALREADY!" I screamed, smacking Hermes.

"I am not Diabolo!" the masked man shouted. "He is on another mission! I am the third executive of 'Bottomless Pit'! My name is..."

He stopped abruptly and turned a pleading gaze toward Crow. *He didn't think of a name.*

Crow panicked for a second and whispered, "...Squid Ink?"

"Yes! My name is Squid Ink!"

I pulled out my wooden clog and tapped Hermes on the head. "That IS Diabolo! His mask broke in the fight this morning, so he tried to buy a new one, but they didn't have any demon ones left, so he just bought a random black one! Can't you recognize his voice and build?!"

"Yo-you saw through it?!" Diabolo... I mean, Squid Ink, cried out.

Squid Ink? It's black, sure, but... oh, right. Squid is a local specialty here. He's wearing a painted squid mask.

"Anyway, Hermes! I cannot let you go any further! But fighting here would cause trouble for the citizens! Let us move elsewhere!"

A crowd of onlookers was starting to gather. Fighting here would definitely cause collateral damage. But as for "appearances"... the moment he started calling himself "Squid Ink" in that getup, his dignity was already out the window. He didn't seem to realize that.

"No," I said flatly.

".....Eh? Why?"

"Why should we move just to suit your convenience?" I sighed. "If you're a self-proclaimed evil organization, you should be prepared to cause a scene and ignore the bystanders."

They had probably planned to buy a new mask, head back, and fight us on the highway, but we caught them early.

"This... this is a matter of pride! It's to settle the debt from this morning!"

"If you're 'Squid Ink' and not Diabolo, then you don't have a debt to settle, do you?"

"Uuuugh.....!"

"Ah! That debt is mine!" Crow tried to back him up.

"Lina-san, if there's a hostage, we can't just abandon them!" Hermes insisted.

"Ah... Hermes, only you believe me. Thank you. Thank you." Squid Ink looked like he was about to cry.

He clapped his hands together. "Oh! I just reme— I mean, I just remembered! Hermes, I have the person who was going to sell you the sword as a hostage! If you want them back safely, come with us!"

It was a terrible lie, but Hermes and Naga were the only ones who could possibly fall for it.

"Well then, let's go," Crow said, taking charge.

We followed a nearly-crying Squid Ink to the outskirts of town.

The location was a beach facing the lake. The water made gentle sounds as it lapped against the shore. This part of the lake was shallow and sandy, but filled with large and small rocks, making it unsuitable for fishing or docking boats.

"Where is the hostage?!" Hermes demanded, looking around.

Squid Ink flourished his cloak. "Hahahaha! You fell for it! There was no hostage from the start!"

"What?!"

"It was just a lie to lure you here! I didn't think you'd be fooled so easily!"

Diabolo and Crow drew their weapons. I and Naga began chanting.

"I won't let you!" Hermes barked, drawing his longsword.

Diabolo and Crow were even faster than they had been this morning. *So they were holding back?* They ignored Hermes and lunged toward me and Naga first.

"Hmph! I see through you!" Naga shouted. "You don't know who has the sword, so you're going to defeat Hermes and then disguise yourselves as him!"

"Is that it?!" Hermes actually agreed with that bizarre theory.

Diabolo and Crow went silent for a second, then said, "Sure, let's go with that!"

Naga was chanting an *Ice Arrow* spell, but I chose something else.

"Raywing!"

I cast the high-speed flight spell. The bystanders hadn't followed us this far, and we were away from the docks. If things got a bit messy here, it wouldn't matter.

I used the wind barrier to surround myself, and as I took off, I "accidentally" knocked Naga over. She probably screamed, but I couldn't hear her through the wind. I flew out over the lake, circling around them.

"You won't be able to move as nimbly in this place!"

Squid Ink and Crow turned back toward me, having lost their target. I landed on a rock jutting out of the water, exactly opposite the masked duo with Hermes in between.

"Hermes!" I called out to his back. "Lure them into the water! It'll kill their speed!"

The distance from the shore to my rock was about twenty paces, but the water was only knee-deep. They could move, but they'd be much slower.

"I've got it!"

Hermes dashed into the water and turned to face them. Squid Ink and Crow didn't hesitate; they splashed into the lake to confront him.

"A mistake!" Crow shouted. "You're trapped too!"

"I don't think so!" Hermes replied with absolute confidence.

Needless to say, I had planned for this.

"Ice Arrow!"

Naga, who had finally recovered on the shore, unleashed her spell. The ice arrows hit the water, freezing a portion of the surface and trapping everyone's feet.

Everyone except me, safely on my rock.

Naga had a habit of overusing ice spells, and I had counted on that.

"Ho-ho-ho-ho! A little something like this is nothing to me!" Naga boasted, having stopped her next spell to strike a pose.

(If she hadn't used an ice spell, I would have just done it myself.)

".....I see....."

"Well, I think this settles it. Why don't you drop your weapons?"

Diabolo and Crow obediently threw their weapons aside.

"Ice Arrow!" I fired my own spell at their feet, making the ice even thicker and more secure.

After I tied up Squid Ink and Crow and melted the ice, we headed back to shore. I pulled off their masks.

"Big brother! And big sister!" Hermes cried out.

"WHAT?!" Naga screamed.

The faces beneath the masks certainly resembled Hermes. His sister was actually quite beautiful.

"You don't seem surprised," Crow—or rather, the sister—said to me.

I shrugged. "You called Hermes by name at the start. I figured you were acquaintances. I didn't know you were siblings, but I could tell you were trying your best not to involve innocent bystanders."

"That's the problem..." the brother said, his expression clouding. "I'm Kernel. This is my sister, Shirley. Hermes's swordsmanship is decent, but... well..."

"He's an idiot?" I finished for him.

He looked at me with a complicated expression. "..............There are many ways to put it. But it's a fact he's not very sharp. I was worried and had someone tail him... he's been scammed by weapon shop clerks, fake clients, fake fortune-tellers, and fake blacksmiths."

"He was tricked that much?"

"It's easier to count the days he *wasn't* tricked."

"Wow....."

I got it. They were probably from a noble family of knights. Hermes was such an easy target it almost made me want to join in on the scamming.

"I didn't think we could just leave him be," Kernel explained. "But telling him to quit wouldn't work. So Shirley and I came up with this plan. We were going to defeat him and then explain everything."

".....Even so....." Hermes's shoulders trembled. "Even so, you didn't have to join an evil organization!"

Seriously? He still doesn't get it?

"No, Hermes. The letter, the sword, the evil organization—it was all a setup. All a lie."

"So you mean this whole mess was just a farce from start to finish?" Naga asked.

I nodded. "Exactly. Well, I didn't lose anything, so I'm not complaining."

"Wait a minute! I still don't understand one thing..." Hermes said. "If my brother and sister were Squid Ink and Crow, then who was Diabolo?!"

I had finally run out of patience.

"Alright, let's do this," I said, clapping my hands and facing Hermes. "Forget about that. Actually, Hermes, your family home is currently being targeted by a secret plot!"

"WHAAAT?!" all the siblings cried out at once.

"That's why your brother and sister came to hire you to guard the estate! They put on this whole show just to test your skills! If you want to know the details, go home and

have your brother explain it to you very, very slowly. Make sure you sit properly while you listen."

"—That works!" Shirley said.

And that was that.

No matter how much of a performance was put on, explaining that he wasn't cut out for this line of work was meaningless if Hermes didn't accept it. In fact, he had zero awareness of how easily he was deceived. If that was the case—it was better to just keep deceiving him forever.

"The truth is, that's exactly how it is, Hermes!"

His brother said, seizing the moment.

"We're sorry for lying, but this was all to test how much of a man you've grown into, and to see if you could truly protect our home!"

"Is that what it was?!"

See? He believed it instantly.

"That's how it is. You'll accept the request to guard our estate, won't you?"

"Of course!"

"Well then, now that we've reached an understanding, could you first cut these ropes for us?"

"You got it!"

He began busily pulling out his knife. While watching the group, Naga leaned in toward me.

"Hey, Lina. In the end, am I right in interpreting this as everything turning out just fine?"

"Well, I guess so."

"I see. In that case—"

Naga turned toward Kernel and Shirley, who had stood up after being freed from their ropes.

"Hmph! It seems that thanks to our assistance, things have settled quite nicely!"

I immediately chimed in.

"But when you think about it, we were basically just dragged into this whole mess, weren't we?"

"No, not at all."

Kernel turned toward us with a friendly smile.

"I believe the reward and apology included in the amount Hermes gave you earlier should be sufficient."

...He knew. Or maybe he was just bluffing. Either way, as long as Hermes was standing right there, playing dumb and saying, "Oh, we didn't receive anything," wasn't going to work. As expected, unlike his younger brother, he was sharp.

In the end, Naga and I quietly watched the siblings depart. I never found out what happened to Hermes after that. I might have discovered the truth if I had looked into it, but I didn't. I wasn't interested in the first place. But most likely—he was still out there somewhere, continuing to be deceived by someone else.

(Sitting Duck: The End)

Seeking Individuality

in an Unknown Chimera

"........Ah..... yeah... sorry... and then?"

I nodded firmly.

Because of a certain inkling I had, I had accidentally tumbled over, but I somehow managed to pick myself up and prompted her to continue.

The room was filled with silence. The woman standing opposite me had a refined face, yet it was tinged with the color of distress. It couldn't be helped; we couldn't just stand there in silence forever.

"It’s a difficult thing to talk about, isn't it, Tiphall-san?"

We were in a room at an inn. I spoke to her while I remained seated in a chair and she sat on the bed opposite me. Though she looked to be only in her early twenties, Tiphall-san was the Vice-Chairperson of the Sorcerers' Guild in a certain town. She was a person of status and honor. I had accepted a request from her to resolve a certain incident before, so we were acquainted.

Today, in this town of Hein, I happened to reunite with her. She told me she had a request and that she couldn't speak of it in public, so I went to her room to hear the story. She kept her gaze fixed on the floor, but eventually, she opened her mouth.

"Lina-san... do you remember Michael?"

"Of course."

".....Where..... how should I even begin....."

"A little while after that incident... I went to a certain town on business for the Guild. It was there that the two of them... met. With a truly unique individual....."

"Ohohoho."

"Flowing black hair! A black cloak with spiked shoulder guards! An outfit like a black bikini! A skull necklace from her neck! That person, whose name I do not know, left behind nothing but a loud laugh and a powerful impression!"

"Hey, could you please listen seriously instead of falling over along with Michael?"

As it turned out, Michael was the sorcerer from that previous incident who had been wooing Tiphall-san. Having been told she didn't like men without individuality, he had been inspired to change. Leaving behind a note saying, "I will obtain the ultimate individuality-gichi," he had vanished.

"Ah-h....."

I let out a weary sigh along with my groan. A total transformation into a truly unique figure—a steel mask, pliers for hands, and ending every sentence with "gichi." He had successfully won Tiphall-san's heart and they had become engaged.

"Even though that person was a woman..... I thought, this is what true individuality is. I never even spoke to her, but I understood. That person possessed absolute confidence in her own tastes and sense, and lived her life that way."

Wait, you thought Michael's outfit looked natural until now?!

Tiphall-san completely ignored the retort I blurted out.

"Of course, I never said such a thing out loud. But... Michael was watching her too, and from my attitude, he must have realized—"

"So that means your request involves Michael?"

After a brief silence following my question, she nodded firmly.

"And then... after that..."

She paused slightly.

"It started to seem like Michael's appearance was becoming unnatural."

"So, does that mean he's with a sorcerer?"

I raised my voice.

"Of course, I won't stop Michael from further enhancing his individuality."

No, stop him. Please.

"But the problem is the method. I had a bad feeling, so I looked into Michael's movements. It seems he has... somehow made contact with a certain sorcerer."

"Yes. To be precise, I should say an ex-sorcerer."

Chimi-Feld. A man who had been obsessed with heretical research and was expelled from the Sorcerers' Guild. Apparently, he had been researching chimeras using humans as subjects.

"And the other day... Michael disappeared..."

A chimera is a synthetic creature created by mixing several types of animals together using magical techniques.

It was best to assume the worst. Whether my thoughts got through to her or not, Tiphall-san nodded.

"Alpa is living in this town now... and a little while ago, it seems he was talking with Michael in a tavern. From what I heard, the two of them were getting quite excited, and Michael was saying, 'Even to the stars!'"

She wore an expression of agony.

"One could even consider the possibility of a fusion between a human and their natural enemy, a monster."

That would truly be the taboo among taboos.

"Of course, this is all just speculation and possibility. Their goal might actually be something else entirely. But it is a fact that the two of them seem to be moving forward with a plan that could turn into a disaster if anything goes wrong. Michael said, 'When the stars align correctly, that is when true individuality will be obtained-gichi.'"

I raised my voice again.

"In other words, they’re totally planning to use some large-scale ritual magic, aren't they?! Isn't this getting seriously dangerous?!"

She nodded slightly.

"If it comes to it, they might summon a monster or something and use it as a material for a chimera with Michael. At the very least, we need to know what they are trying to do. And if there is a high possibility of a major accident, or if Michael intends to stop being human, we must stop them at all costs."

Oho. I was secretly impressed. Since Tiphall-san was a huge fan of "weird individuality," I thought she might even welcome him becoming half-monster, but it seemed she still possessed a human heart.

"However, when I investigated further, it seems Alpa has not returned home for some time."

"Not... home?"

She nodded at my parrot-like response.

"I think the most likely possibility is that he is with Michael, preparing for that ritual or something somewhere. I brought about ten sorcerers with me to search for them, but so far, we haven't found any strong leads. And even if we did find them, my companions are not accustomed to combat. I don't have the confidence to stop them if they resort to force. So, Lina-san, could you please lend us your strength?"

Tiphall-san bowed her head deeply. If that was the case, I couldn't exactly turn her down.

"The reward will be generous."

I gave a wry smile at her words.

The search did not go smoothly. If Michael and Alpa were nearby, they would naturally have to procure food somehow. Therefore, we divided the tasks and conducted inquiries primarily at grocery stores and restaurants, but we couldn't find any recent leads. Time passed without any progress.

Two days after I accepted the request, I finished my lunch and inquiries at a restaurant and stepped outside. There, I happened to run into Tiphall-san.

"Lina-san."

She gave me a friendly smile, but behind it, I could see her distress and impatience.

"How is it? Did you find anything?"

When she asked, I shrugged.

"Hmm... nothing so far. How about you?"

She wore a gloomy expression and slowly shook her head.

"The same. I haven't heard any stories of Michael or Alpa being seen in town these past few days... but I also haven't heard anything about them stocking up on food in advance or leaving town."

That was the problem. While it was possible they had left town, it was also possible they were hiding somewhere in town while making it look otherwise. We only had about ten people. That was too few to expand the search area without any confirmation.

Anyway, there was nothing we could do without a lead, but repeating inquiries without finding anything was mentally draining. Tiphall-san's face clearly showed signs of exhaustion.

"By the way, Tiphall-san, are you eating properly and getting enough rest? If you collapse here, then there really will be nothing we can do."

"Yes, I know. I was thinking of finishing up inquiries at two or three more shops and then having lunch."

As she said this, Tiphall-san headed toward a bakery further down the street. Worried, I followed along.

A bell chimed as we entered the shop.

"Where?!"

Tiphall-san gasped, turned around as if startled, and peered around me.

...This woman... what exactly does she think Michael is?

Oh, this bread is actually pretty good. Anyway, I looked at the man dripping with cold sweat while clutching a bundle of bread.

"What are you doing, Lina-san?!"

Perhaps because of the time of day, or simply because it wasn't popular, there was only the owner behind the counter and one blonde man with a bag full of bread.

The blonde man looked at us and visibly flinched. However, Tiphall wandered past him to the counter and asked the old man, "I'd like to ask... has a man with a half-iron mask and a pair of pincers come to shop here lately?"

"Eh? An iron mask and pincers? No, haven't seen 'em."

"I see..."

Behind that conversation, the blonde man tried to sneak toward the exit. The moment he tried to pass me, I firmly grabbed his upper arm!

I remembered his true face from before. If he wasn't wearing that weird iron mask, he had a face one could call handsome. The face of the man in front of me matched that... however...

Tiphall stared at the blonde man for a moment. "He does look similar... but there's no iron mask."

"No, I mean..."

"What are you doing, Lina-san?!" Tiphall turned around as if startled, looking around me frantically.

This woman... what does she think Michael is...?

I pointed at the blonde man in front of me with zero confidence. "You're Michael, right?"

When asked, he averted his gaze. "Y-you have the wrong person-gichi."

"HE SAID GICHI!!!" Tiphall and I screamed in unison.

"I screwed up-gichi!" Michael shouted and threw the bag of bread he was holding!

"The bread!" I instinctively let go of Michael and dove sideways, catching the bag just in time! But in that moment, a small roll tumbled out of the bag!

I wouldn't let it happen! I wouldn't let food go to waste! I forced my body to twist, and just before the bread hit the floor, I caught it firmly in my mouth!

I wasn't about to lose when it came to food. Anyway, I couldn’t let Michael get away like this either, I quickly picked myself up and chased after the fleeing Michael!

By the time I made it outside, I saw Michael's back disappearing around a corner further down the street.

Chew, chew! I masticated the bitten bread at top speed and swallowed it down.

"Raywing!"

I released the spell and took to the air!

The sound of galloping hooves echoed. A horse carrying Michael leaped from a corner of the street. Michael must have borrowed a horse tied up at someone’s house.

Of course, if my opponent was on a horse, I wouldn't be able to catch up no matter how hard I ran. However! I had high-speed flight magic! I had no intention of letting him go!

Raywing is a difficult spell to control, as the sum of weight, speed, and altitude is proportional to the caster's skill. But if you can master it, nothing is more convenient. I controlled the spell and first gained altitude. Looking down from the heights, Michael’s position was obvious! Once I confirmed his location and direction, I dropped my altitude back down to just above the ground and sped off at maximum velocity!

I dodged through streets to the right and left. Finally, as I approached the edge of town, I could see Michael’s back as he fled!

The horse carrying Michael completely left the town and entered a road leading into the nearby mountains. The path zigzagged up the mountain. If that was the case!

I poured my willpower into increasing my speed. However, whether the horse was good or Michael’s skill was high, the distance only closed bit by bit. I gained altitude again and cut straight across the slope from the air, above the clustered trees! I flew over Michael’s head, got ahead of him, canceled the spell, landed, and began chanting!

Soon, the sound of hooves approached. It seemed he hadn't noticed I'd gotten ahead of him. When he showed his face, I would blow him away with the spell I was currently chanting, stop his movement, and catch him!

But before Michael’s horse appeared on the mountain path, it emerged from the trackless woods to the side!

A beast appeared, weaving through the trees with a roar! It was certainly a lion, but its body was covered in faces!

His eyes glaring at me were not just a single pair! There were many, many lion faces all over his body!

A Chimera! I had some confidence in my swordplay, but I had no desire to engage in close combat with something like that. "Explosion Array!"

The moment the opponent leaped onto the road to chase me—*BOOM!*

The blow I unleashed sent the Chimera's body flying. An attack spell that blew up the earth and turned it into shrapnel! Even if I couldn't finish it with one shot, it should hurt. Each of the Chimera's faces had eyes and noses that served as weak points. If the shrapnel hit those directly, it would be quite painful! Just in case, I began chanting the next spell under my breath.

The Chimera, which had blown back and was lying in the bushes, stopped moving for a moment, then staggered to its feet. I thought it might attack, but it silently turned around and retreated.

There was no need to pursue it. The important thing now was not defeating the Chimera, but capturing Michael.

Thinking that, I suddenly realized something. The sound of the horse's hooves had stopped.

Damn it!

I jumped out onto the road. There stood a single horse. But Michael had disappeared from its back. He must have heard the sound of the attack spell, realized I was ahead of him, and fled. Whether that Chimera attack was calculated for that purpose or not...

"I messed up..."

The wind blew, shaking the leaves of the trees.

Tiphall’s throat made a gulping sound. "Is it... here?"

"Yes. Here." I nodded and looked into the depths of the greenery. I took a piece of bread from the bag I was still carrying and put it in my mouth.

I had returned to town, told Tiphall what happened, and come back again. This time, with Tiphall. In the end, I left the assistant mages in town. While more people would be better for searching the mountains, there was a chance Michael and the others might try to move their hideout. If we put all our effort into a mountain hunt and left the town empty, they might escape in the crossover.

Above all, if a Chimera was set upon a group of people unaccustomed to battle, there was a risk of panic. If that happened, I wouldn't be able to protect everyone alone. I had told Tiphall to stay in town too, but I was swayed by her words that she was the only one who could persuade Michael.

I pointed into the pathless greenery. "The Chimera came from this way. So Michael and Alpa’s hideout should be over there."

"But isn't 'this way' too vague a clue?"

"It's not vague at all. Michael fled toward his own nest. In other words, toward where Alpa is. If you look closely around here..."

I stepped from the mountain path into the weeds and brush.

"There's a clue...?" Tiphall’s voice was doubtful as she followed me.

"Yeah. When a big body passes through, twigs in the bushes break and there are hollows in the ground."

As I spoke, I found a clear depression in the leaf mold ahead.

"I'll say it now: I think there will be another Chimera attack. But whatever you do, don't panic and run away, and don't cling to me. As long as you follow that, I'll manage somehow. If you aren't confident you can stay calm, you should wait below."

"No... I'm fine. I believe in you, Lina-san."

There was a slight tremor of fear in her voice, but she said it firmly.

As we pushed through the grass, we soon came to a small rocky area. The surroundings were enclosed by greenery and soil, but at the exposed rock, the Chimera’s footprints naturally vanished.

"We can't follow the tracks with this..."

I didn't say anything to her murmur. Instead, I signaled with a gesture of my finger. *Go ahead*.

Her face stiffened slightly, but in the end, she said nothing and walked forward slowly. She passed my side, and just as she reached the middle of the rocky area—*Grawwr!*

A lion Chimera with many heads! Letting out a fierce roar, it leaped from the trees toward Tiphall!

Before it could reach her—

"Freeze Arrow!"

The cold spell I unleashed instantly froze the leaping Chimera!

Tiphall stared at the frozen Chimera for a while, then turned to me with slightly tearful eyes.

"You... you were testing me, weren't you, Lina-san?"

"You figured it out, didn't you?" I replied without a hint of guilt.

I had sensed the Chimera hiding near the rocks. That was why I had prepared an attack spell and sent her ahead. I was testing whether she would panic when it came down to it, as she had promised. If she had forgotten my instructions and fled blindly at this level, I intended to tell her to go back to town.

Don't call me cruel. Once we stepped into Michael and Alpa’s hideout, there was a good chance of a "welcome" much worse than this Chimera.

Contrary to my expectations, even knowing this was a test and having been targeted by the Chimera, she stepped forward. In other words...

"I passed, didn't I?"

"Full marks. Since the Chimera was lying in wait, it means we're close. I'll be even more careful from here on."

"I understand," she nodded, and the two of us began walking again.

We passed the rocky area and entered the trees. And just as I expected, before we had gone very far, Tiphall and I stopped at the same time.

Ahead of us, an opening yawned. In a small, steep cliff, half-buried in ivy, brush, and weeds, was a black hole. It wasn't a cave. The entrance was reinforced with old timber.

"I think I heard a story once that gemstones used to be mined in these mountains long ago," Tiphall whispered.

"A mine...?"

A mine, huh. It was certainly a good place to hide.

I walked toward it. "Looks like we hit the jackpot. I'll take the lead. Please provide your own light. Keep the brightness low. Ideally, we want to catch them off guard and pin them down... but we'll play it by ear depending on the situation."

"Understood," she said.

I chanted a spell and drew my short sword.

"Lighting!"

I lit a magical light at the tip of the blade to serve as a makeshift torch. This spell, useful for reading books at night, is a must-have for any mage. Tiphall took out a quill, cast lighting on it, and held it up.

The two of us entered the abandoned mine. The temperature changed the moment we stepped through the entrance.

Darkness welcomed the two of us, the damp air heavy with the musky scent of animals. It was likely from the chimeras constantly moving in and out of the tunnels. There were several forks in the road, but by following the strongest scent of the beasts, we managed not to lose our way.

I wondered how long we had been walking. Eventually, far off in the darkness ahead, a faint glimmer of light appeared. We stopped in unison, our eyes fixed on the glow.

".....? Do you hear that.....?" Tiphall-san whispered.

I strained my ears. I could hear it now—a distant, rhythmic sound like a prayer or an incantation, which had been masked by the sound of our own footsteps until just a moment ago.

Anxiety flickered across our faces. We were likely thinking the same thing: had the ritual to turn Michael into a chimera already begun? If so, we no longer had the luxury of staying quiet and waiting for an opening.

"Michael!"

We broke into a dash toward the light. We sprinted through the mine shaft, bursting out into a wide, open cavern. At Tiphall-san's cry, Michael—still wearing his half-steel mask and plier-hands—stood atop a magic circle. He looked toward us but didn't move an inch.

The cavern was a semi-natural cave, illuminated by several glowing magical lights. It was a fantastical sight, with stalactites connecting the ceiling and floor like a stone forest, though the natural beauty was abruptly cut by leveled, man-made paths.

The man who had been chanting with his back to us stopped. He slowly turned around, but contrary to my expectations, he had a remarkably plain face. He looked to be in his late forties, of average height and build—the kind of person you'd see anywhere. However, within that ordinary exterior, his eyes flashed with an unsettling, unnatural light.

".....I heard from Michael. That some might come to interfere."

His tone was arrogant, sounding exactly like a clichéd villain from a third-rate bard's tale. He wore a black cloak, and a few white hairs stood out against his black mane.

Behind him was a space as vast as a hall, large enough to build a small house. The entire floor was covered in a sea of countless magic circles. They were intricately interconnected, glowing with a power that felt both dense and distorted.

"......Alpa Syfeld....." Tiphall-san's voice dripped with blatant anger.

Despite his plain appearance, Alpa's manner of speaking remained haughty, his voice high-pitched and grating.

"I cannot forgive you! A chimera researcher who stained his hands with forbidden arts, a sorcerer who showed Michael such a twisted path... and yet, your own individuality is so incredibly weak!"

That's the part you're mad about?!

Alpa's brow twitched at her accusation. "I do not understand what you are babbling about... but it is too late! The stars are not yet aligned, but the die is cast! My research will bear fruit! A supreme chimera will be born! With it, I shall achieve my revenge against the foolish Sorcerers' Guild that denied my genius!"

Wow, this guy is incredibly generic. He probably thought he sounded cool, but he was just rattling off the most basic villain lines. Seeing only two women, Alpa looked at us with a smug, overconfident expression.

"I shall praise you for surviving the fangs of the chimeras I unleashed and making it this far! But realize that this path leads only to further regret! Come! My servant, Great Fang!"

Something lurched in the corner of my vision. Before it could even fully show its form from behind the stalactites, I unleashed a spell I had been quietly preparing.

BA-BOOOM!

Instead of a "masterpiece," it looked more like a failure. It, along with the surrounding stalactites, was blown away by my attack before it could even roar.

Alpa's jaw dropped. "Im-Impossible... My Great Fang... so easily..."

"It was pretty generic, wasn't it? Actually, it looked more like a draft than a finished product."

Having finally finished the incantation that allowed me to speak freely again, I took the opportunity to critique him.

"Wait... I suspect your research into human chimeras didn't start because you reached some pinnacle of truth. You were just mediocre at everything else and decided to do something 'shocking' just to get some attention... didn't you?"

Alpa's face turned bright red, whether from hitting the nail on the head or out of pure indignation.

"H-How dare you speak such nonsense! You think defeating a mere vanguard chimera makes you special?! My supreme chimera is almost complete!"

He gestured toward the glowing magic circles. If I looked closely, Michael wasn't the only one there. Standing in the leakage of magical light were a Chihuahua, a mud snail, and a single quail.

"You're planning to make a chimera out of *those*?" I asked.

Alpa looked at them with an ecstatic, almost trance-like gaze. "Don't you see, you commoners?! What I sought was a being with human will and intelligence, the aggression and tracking of a hound, the defense of a dragon, and the mobility of a bird of prey! Because of your interference, I had to move up the schedule before the stars were right, and I had to substitute the base animals with whatever was at hand!"

"It sounds like your plan has fallen apart so badly that it's barely even a plan anymore..."

Our murmurs didn't reach Alpa, who was drunk on his own internal monologue.

"I shall teach you what this magic circle is! It is an automated device that accumulates miasma within the base subjects and then synthesizes them together! It is useless to defeat me now! Once the array has started, the chants I spoke earlier were merely to accelerate the ritual! It is impossible for you to stop it! The finished chimera will possess potential magic power and resistance to spells that doesn't fall short of a pure-blooded monster! If you wish to defeat it, go bring a sorcerer who can use a Dragon Slayer spell!"

"Um. I'm really sorry to ruin the mood when you're so excited, but..."

I raised my hand awkwardly.

"I can use that spell."

A heavy silence fell over the room. Alpa whispered in a small, almost apologetic voice, "...Could you perhaps pretend, for the sake of the plot, that you can't use it for some reason?"

"No. Why would I do that?"

Alpa furrowed his brow, thinking hard, then suddenly clapped his hands together.

"I-I see! Michael! Can you hear me?! Can you hear my voice?!" Tiphall-san cried out.

".....Of course I can hear you-gichi," Michael replied for the first time. Until then, he had been unresponsive.

"I intended to say nothing until it was all over-gichi... but hearing the conversation between Lina-san and Alpa, I've started to feel... well, quite uneasy."

That made sense. Finding out the sorcerer turning you into a monster might actually be a total hack would make anyone nervous.

"Michael! Please! Get out of there!" Tiphall-san's voice was desperate.

"Tiphall-san! Persuade him! Tell him to leave the circle on his own!" I shouted. Attacking the circle was risky, and walking in to pull him out wasn't exactly a "smart" move.

Michael wavered, looking at her with uncertainty—but then he slowly shook his head. ".....I... I still can't do it-gichi."

"Why not?!"

"Because... I promised to obtain further individuality for you, my Vice-Chairperson."

"Wait, *that's* why?! That's the reason you won't stop the chimera-fication?!"

This wasn't some deeply human, heartfelt drama; it was just plain weird. I felt like I should be angry, but instead, I was just baffled.

"Listen to me, Michael! If you become a chimera like this, you won't be a 'unique person' anymore! You'll just be a chimera!" Tiphall-san's voice echoed through the cave.

"Even if a strange chimera is created, it doesn't mean *your* personality is unique; it just means the creator’s taste is weird! At this rate, no matter what happens, you won't gain any true individuality of your own! You can't let yourself become some easy, pre-made monster if you want to be truly interesting!"

".....It seems... I was wrong-gichi."

Michael flashed a weak smile.

"In my haste for individuality, I was about to cling to someone else's borrowed ideas-gichi. My eyes have been opened-gichi."

Actually, I thought, *continuing to seek weirdness just because a woman told you to* means your eyes aren't open at all. I had many retorts, but for now, persuading him to leave was priority number one.

"I’m coming out now-gichi."

"W-Wait! Stop! This wasn't the deal!" Alpa tried to stop him, but Michael’s slow march didn't waver.

"I’m sorry for breaking my promise-gichi. But I’ve realized my mistake. I cannot cooperate with you-gichi."

Alpa gnashed his teeth, but he didn't move to intercept, seemingly unskilled in physical confrontation. Michael looked straight into Tiphall-san’s eyes, his plier-hands clacking as he walked toward her, finally stepping out of the magic circle.

"Oh. I just realized something."

I decided to drive a wedge into the situation. The light from the magic circle was intensifying, making a low humming sound.

"Wait... Alpa, if this is an automated device to synthesize subjects... and Michael, the main human subject, just left... doesn't that mean the whole thing is pointless?"

"Eh?" The smug expression vanished from Alpa’s face.

"And another thing... you said you wanted a being with human intelligence, right? That assumed Michael would be the core. If it's just a Chihuahua, a mud snail, and a quail, and you haven't given them orders... aren't you just going to end up with a very powerful, very confused, and very weird animal that won't listen to anyone?"

".....Wait, what.....?"

At that moment, the light from the magic circle swelled and burst! When the glare faded, the magic circle was cold and dark. In its center stood a single shadow.

The supreme being—possessing the combined power of a Chihuahua, a mud snail, and a quail—was complete!

It had the body of a Chihuahua encased in a giant mud snail shell, with quail wings sprouting from the sides. It let out a tiny "*pyawan!*" sound, looked startled by the humans present, turned its tail to us, gave a little flutter of its wings, and scurried off into the stalactites.

A long silence followed.

Alpa slumped his shoulders, looking incredibly pathetic as he followed us out of the mine at a distance of about twenty paces. I could have blasted him, but he seemed harmless enough now.

Tiphall-san and Michael were acting strangely friendly.

"But now the problem remains... how shall I obtain further individuality-gichi?"

"That's right... this is something you'll have to solve on your own, Michael!"

The three of us left the abandoned mine behind. As we walked back toward town, I felt a lingering sense of dissatisfaction with how everything had wrapped up. Alpa continued to trudge behind us, looking lonely, but I didn't say a word to him. It’s best not to comfort people like that; you don't want them getting attached.

(Seeking Individuality in an Unknown Chimera: The End)

Afterword

Author: Spring. The season when plants and trees bud.

L: Spring.

Author: It’s a time when people blame the season for everything.

L: Oh, you mean like "Spring makes people do crazy things"? I don't like the idea of crimes being blamed on the weather.

Author: Crimes happen all year round, anyway.

L: And on that note, here is Slayers Special Volume 26, *Missing Saint*!

Author: What kind of lead-in is that?! It makes it sound like publishing a book is a criminal act! Though, I suppose the author gets "murdered" in every afterword...

L: Now, now. Don't be angry. Think of it as a seasonal tradition, like a clock chiming.

Author: ......Hmph. Fine.

L: Speaking of traditions, what was the New Year’s card like this year?

Author: (Attempting a forced subject change) Well, it was a pretty normal New Year’s theme. I drew a picture of Lina holding up one finger for the Year of the Rat.

L: (Staring at her own finger) Oh, so it was like the number one?

Author: "It's been over a decade since my debut! I'm running out of New Year's ideas! Is my blonde hair sticking out?" ...That's the kind of vibe I sent out!

L: You just gave up! And wait, the way you said that sounds like you twisted my neck and hid my body inside a stuffed animal!

Author: I didn't give up! I put thought into it! Since it was the Year of the Dog (Inu), I considered a pun like "Inu" (Not here) with a blank page, or "Inu" (Leaving) with a back view...

L: That wouldn't even look like a New Year's card!

Author: So I drew Lina trying to fire a beam from her fingertip.

L: I thought it was a pun on "Wan" (Woof)... no, wait.

Author: I realized that interpretation was possible after I sent it to print, but I wasn't thinking at all back then.

L: But there are other dog themes! Like animal cosplay or fursuits.

Author: I see. Or... a bit of a twist, like a dog plushie lying on the floor, and through a rip in the seam, you see a single eye peeking out...

L: Stop! That sounds like a suspense movie!

Author: And then "Happy New Year" written in crimson...

L: That just looks like a blood message! That's definitely a "something is crawling out of there" kind of picture! It ruins the holiday mood!

Author: Mmm. I guess it’s no good... Curse you, dogs.

L: It’s not the dog’s fault! Anyway, why are we talking about the Year of the Dog now? We should be looking forward to the Year of the Boar.

Author: I see. The Boar! Aside from drawing a boar head-on, maybe "I" (Boar) for... anything goes!

L: (Backing away) Just stay away from the plushie ideas. Anyway, I'll let the author think about that.

Author: Eh? Wait... what are you doing with that oversized plushie and the wire?

L: (Working) Oh, this? It's just for "recycling."

Author: Wait a minute! Isn't the point of the afterword for me to have my turn?!

L: (Cheerfully) I think most people have dreamed of their dolls or plushies coming to life. But seeing someone squirming inside while groaning is just a bit too "Alien" for me, so I'll just zip this up and put it in the closet for the thrift shop.

L: And with the tidying up finished—I’ll see you all in the next Special!

Afterword: The End